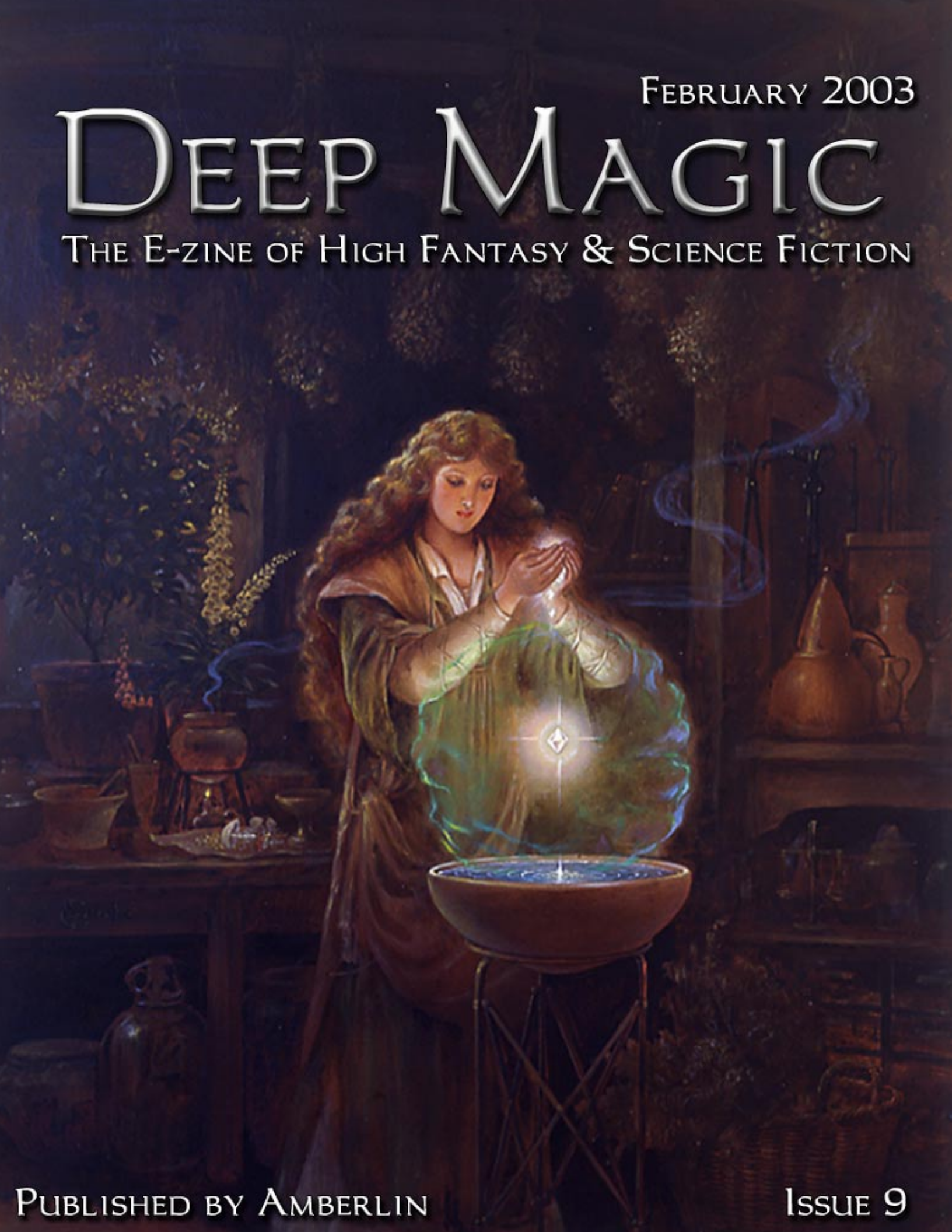
February 2003

# Deep Magic

The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction



Published by Amberlin

Issue 9

Published by
The Amberlin Group, LLC.

Chief Editor - Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor - Brendon Taylor
Contributing Editor - Jeff Wheeler
Contributing Editor - Melissa Thomas
Associate Editor - Peter Dahl
Associate Editor - JW Wrenn
Associate Editor - Rochelle Buck
Associate Editor - Joel Brown

Graphic Design - Jeremy Whitted
Art Director - Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director - Reuben Fox

Marketing - Jeff Wheeler
Legal - Brendon Taylor

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: feedback@amberlin.com

Cover by Kinuko Craft
"*Scent of Magic*"

# Table of Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| Note From the Editors | 3 |
| Writing Challenge | 4 |
| Poll: The Best Fantasy/SciFi Couple | 9 |
| Fantasy Short: *Birth of a Hero* | 10 |
| Feature Artist: Kinuko Craft | 11 |
| Article: Do I Write Funny? | 13 |
| Interview: Steve Westcott | 16 |
| Fantasy Short: *Magic Chicken* | 19 |
| Article: Ringing True | 20 |
| Fantasy Short: *LotR Bachelor Auction* | 24 |
| Artist Profile: Magnus Larbrant | 25 |
| Fantasy Novel: *Tears of Minya* | 26 |

## Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will update our archived issues accordingly. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please send an email to feedback@amberlin.com, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

*Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.*

All Content copyright © 2003
The Amberlin Group, LLC

# Note from the Editors

February 2003

Welcome to yet another month of Deep Magic. Yep, we're still here and still kicking. We've had a great couple months, and we're looking forward to much more to come. Our subscription numbers are exceeding expectations, and more people download Deep Magic with each successive month. Ah, it's so nice to see progress. Of course, it's even more important that the quality of the e-zine remains high, and we think this issue is right up to par with the rest.

To start, we have three great fantasy stories for you. What, no SciFi? Have no fear, you'll get an extra helping next month. But for now, enjoy a comedy trio of *Birth of a Hero* by Steve Westcott, *Magic Chicken* by M. Thomas, and *LotR Bachelor Auction* by Brendon Taylor. All three should make you laugh. We also feature an article and interview with Steve Westcott, author of the new novel, *Reluctant Heroes*.

Also in this issue, resident lawyer Brendon Taylor offers an article on how to make your story ring true. To round out our written-word portion of the e-zine, we offer the next few chapters of *Tears of Minya*, the new fantasy novel by Jeff Wheeler.

The first thing you probably noticed is the cover art. Read an interview from artist Kinuko Craft and check out a couple more pictures. We also have the superb digital artwork of Magnus Larbrant.

In addition, our poll this month jumps into the ever important topic of relationships, so vote for your favorite fantasy/scifi couple. And be sure to find out who won the SciFi tournament. Did your favorite movie make it on top?

We at Deep Magic are also looking forward. We are looking for fantasy and science fiction submissions, both stories and artwork. And if you have any suggestions to make Deep Magic even more valuable, please don't hesitate to email us. Enjoy your reading!

The Editors
DEEP MAGIC

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

# Writing Challenge

After last month's most successful writing challenge yet, we were concerned when our inbox was very shallow for much of the month. Not to fear, our valiant readers/writers came through in the end with many fine submissions. We selected two that we found particularly amusing and thank those of you who submitted for bringing a smile to our faces. We hope to receive many more fine submissions this next month, by the 20th, if you please. Read the challenge below and send your submissions to writingchallenge@amberlin.com. For last month, the selections are below.

A Small Problem by Keith Barrett
Dear Bates by Duane B. Frazure

We also want to mention that writing challenge submissions are rarely edited by our staff. These submissions are exercises and not meant to be polished, so please excuse any typos you might catch.

## February 2003 Writing Challenge

**Romance and true love hold a certain appeal for many fantasy and sci-fi fans. In some films or literature, a romantic relationship is portrayed in a very heavy-handed manner. All of you who enjoyed the latest Star Wars movie might have missed the Anakin/Padme schmaltz. But heavy-handed or subtle, readers and audiences seem to tolerate love themes in this genre. So being the month of St. Valentines Day, we issue a new writing challenge. Weave a little love into your piece. It could be dialogue between two characters while trapped in the Evil Overlord's domain. A moment of flirting in a deep space asteroid. We won't limit the type of love you choose (platonic, romantic, best friends, etc.) but be sure it's appropriate for Deep Magic. And a hint: subtlety usually works better than gushing. Try to remember that next time George.**

January 2003 Writing Challenge: So you think you're funny? Oh sure, maybe your college buddies thought your fart jokes should have won a Pulitzer. But it takes a special something to put humor down on the page. Sometimes that's nothing more than a twisted sense of reality, other times it's legitimate talent. You may have noticed we like a little levity here at Deep Magic occasionally. This month's challenge, in preparation for our Humor Issue, is to be funny. That's it. Simple. It can be a line, a paragraph, or a page. Give us your best literary punchline. Tell us about your hero who found out his/her magical talents lie solely in the culinary arts. (Back Evil Usurper, or I shall unleash the full power of my magical quiche on thee!) Try to keep it under 500 words. But if it's REALLY funny, we'll keep reading past that. No knock-knock jokes please. If we choose your work, you'll find yourself sharing page-space with some of the funniest folk fantasy has to foffer. Er, offer.

# A Small Problem
## By Keith Barrett

A knock on the door brought Ferraro the Wizard abruptly out of his reverie. He had been dwelling on the pleasant memories of his younger days; memories that helped take his mind off his age and his current predicament.

*Whoever that is,* he thought, *has to be desperate to visit me at this late hour. Or mad.*

Ferraro shifted the fur blanket draped over his lap and hung it over the arm of his rocking chair. He stood up a little shakily, reached for the lantern on the desk next to him and shuffled towards the door.

His chair, desk and bed were the only furniture in the little makeshift hovel he called home. The cold winter wind outside whistled through the cracks in the board walls and shuttered windows, causing the lantern's flame to flicker in its glass chimney and Ferraro's shadow to caper about like a mad ghost on the wall.

He opened his creaky door and said, "Yes?"

"It is Geraldo, old wizard," a hunched figure answered, his voice quivering. Ferraro recognized the short, round man hugging his fur coat close to his body as the local baker.

"Come in."

Ferraro gestured with his hand for Geraldo to enter and the man stumbled in, shivering despite the thick coat he had on. He surveyed the room hesitantly and Ferraro realized he was looking for a place to sit.

"I am afraid I am a little short of seating places," Ferraro said, "perhaps you would like to sit on the bed."

*And when I have helped you, you can pay me with food for the next month*, he added in his head.

"What can I do for you, Geraldo?" Ferraro asked as he moved his rocking chair to face his visitor who had made himself comfortable on the bed.

"Old wizard, it is my son, Geraldinho."

"What is wrong with your son?" Ferraro asked, trying not to show his displeasure at being called an *old* wizard again.

"Well, he has a small problem," Geraldo answered.

He suddenly turned bright red and stammered, "Maybe not so small, but the other boys are teasing him, you understand."

"Go on," Ferraro said, stifling a smile. It was obviously a sore point with Geraldo and he did not want to jeopardize his future meals. Ferraro's stomach grumbled in agreement.

"Tell me, do you perhaps have a spell or an ointment which I could buy? Something that would aid in the growth of a part of the body that was, shall we say, underdeveloped." Geraldo's dark, slitted eyes lit up in hope as he finished blurting out his request.

Ferraro studied his double chinned, bulbous nosed supplicant for a moment before answering.

"No, I am afraid I do not," he answered, reluctantly enunciating each word. His stomach grumbled at him in disapproval.

He did in fact know a growth spell, but it was far too risky to use on such a delicate part of

the anatomy. It worked fast and if you weren't quick enough with the counter spell, it tended to get totally out of hand. Ferraro decided it was best not to admit knowledge of any such spell, even though it cost him dearly.

Geraldo's hopeful countenance dropped from his face and a look of profound disappointment replaced it.

"It is hereditary, you know. On my wife's side, of course," he said, shaking his head in shame. "Her father was the same. I saw it with my own two eyes."

Ferraro shuddered at the picture Geraldo's words conjured in his mind, but said nothing.

"I heard the boys teasing my little Geraldinho outside the bakery yesterday," Geraldo continued, a maudlin mood overtaking him. "That is why I came to ask for your help. 'Girly face, girly face,' they shouted, over and over. It was terrible. My boy came running in, crying."

"Girly face?" Ferraro frowned in confusion.

"Yes, 'girly face'. The words do not have to be clever to be cruel."

"Tell me, Geraldo, what exactly is wrong with your boy?"

"His nose. It is small and petite, like a girl's. It is a little, upturned, pointy, *girly* nose." Geraldo emphasized each offending word with a shake of his fist.

"His nose!" Ferraro exclaimed. He wanted to stamp his feet on the floor in sheer incredulous frustration.

"Well, what did you think I was talking about?"

# Dear Bates

## By Duane B. Frazure

Dear Bates,

By the time you receive this letter, you will have already been sworn in as the personal assistant and regent groomsman to Baron Hutchinson. Please accept my warmest wishes and most heartfelt condolences for this occurrence. I have received communication from several individuals close to your prior employ that have related your opinions of Baron Hutchinson and your reluctance to accept this assignment. I trust that you will treat this letter with all due discretion and destroy it promptly upon reading my signature at the bottom.

I write to offer advice that, if followed, may earn you a longer tenure and shorter neck than were my fate. After a mere five months of service, I have distilled five simple rules that will ease your displeasure of service.

1. Learn to stoop.

As you doubtless have learned, Baron Hutchinson is a bit on the wee side. Yet, he fancies himself to be much grander, in personality and presence. I spent the last three months gradually replacing the heels of the Baron's boots with ever-slightly higher ones. He has gained nearly half a hand, but he still rarely rises in height above the cleavage of a maiden. At times, that seems to suit him, but when you are in his presence, never try to look down upon him.

2. Pretend his hair is real at all times.

Oh, you'll be asked to clean the dead rodent weekly, but never look at his beady head while it is naked. Take heed; he has a pink birth mark that looks just like a flaccid member on the crown of his head. Do not look at it. The hair played a pivotal part in my downfall. All had been relatively well between the Baron and me until the day he caught me wearing his hair and eliciting mock orders in a shrill voice in mimic of his. That brings me to the next piece of advice.

3. Never sit next to him while he sings, particularly in the cathedral.

You might think you can handle it. You might say, "How bad can it be?" Trust me. You will not be able to keep a properly solemn expression and will most likely let slip a great guffaw. As with most things, he fancies himself to be rather musically adept. But, you will sooner hear cows dropped off the edge of a cliff and believe you have heard music than when you experience the sound he makes when so endeavored.

4. Omit from your vocabulary, "Dear Lord, what is that stench?" and all similar phrases.

As you have already met the Baron, I doubt this rule will need much explaining. Never have I met a person with worse stink of body and mouth than the Baron. You may think it simple to avoid offending him with a phrase such as I have warned against above. Oh that it were so easy. I have already mentioned his diminutive stature. I have not mentioned that he enjoys slinking around the palace like a "prowling puma." You will learn this and many other phrases the Baron fancies to describe his person. One day recently, while carrying a load of starched undergarments to the Baron's bedchambers, I caught a breath of exceptionally fowl air and exclaimed the above-noted phrase. It was my last day in freedom. When I realized my time was short, I violated the fifth piece of advice I will offer you.

5. Do not comment on the stains in the Baron's clothing, particularly his undergarments.

In your service of his laundry, you will quickly discover one of the sources of the Baron's odor. Unfortunately, the Baron's pride will add to your daily tasks the chore of washing his undergarments so the maidens who launder the rest of the linens will not see the Baron's secret. You might be inclined to use the terms, "bludgeon stain" or "pottery burn" to offer polite excuses for the Baron. Or, you might say something like, "By adding a wedge of lemon to a warm kettle, I was able to scrub away the gravy lines in your linens, Baron." Unless you would like to hang next to me, avoid all such discussion. Simply pretend like the stains do not exist.

There are many other things I would like to warn you about, but time runs short. Visit me if you like. The execution should not take place for another three weeks.

Your friend,

Natash

# Poll: Favorite Couple in Fantasy/SciFi

Well, it's February already. Here in the U.S. (and Canada, if our research is to be trusted), that means Valentine's Day. So with that in mind, we offer a poll to choose your favorite romantic couple in the Fantasy/SciFi genres.

What do you think? Does it get any better than Han Solo & Princess Leia from Star Wars? Maybe Aragorn & Arwen? (Admittedly, that relationship exists more in the movie than the book, but still...) How about Wesley and Buttercup from Princess Bride? Arthur & Gwynevere? We came up with a list of nine famous couples for you to choose from. Did we miss any? Then visit our Message Boards and post your thoughts. We always welcome them. So, without further ado....

## Go to the website and vote!

**Final Results:**
**The Best SciFi Movie of All Time**

1. **The Matrix**
2. Star Wars
3. Alien
4. Terminator
5. Star Trek
6. 12 Monkeys
6. Stargate
8. Fifth Element
9. Minority Report
10. Men In Black

See the results and percentages here.

Our poll sponsored by csPoller. They provided us a great poll script, so please go to their site and check out their great scripts. They offer a wide selection of quality cgi-scripts, and their support is fantastic.

# Birth of a Hero
## By Steve Westcott

Reubin shuffled to the serving counter, careful to avoid the haphazard piles of magical oddities and artefacts that lay stacked around the floor. Capes, tunics, and assorted garments were randomly draped over anything that didn't move. Swords and daggers vied for floor space with armour, cuirasses and helms. Flimsy racks, full to overflowing with various bottles, jars, and boxes threatened to buckle under the weight. In short, it was a right bloody mess.

To Reubin, however, it was an organised mess. He knew where everything was and could find any item in under a…

He glanced around the store and grimaced. Perhaps he should tidy up a little when he had a little more time to spare. He turned to peer at the timepiece on the wall behind him. However, all he saw was a white blur. With it being hung between the demon-blessed blade, Orcsbane, and the perpetually shifting colours of the Shroud of Joeseff, the clock was difficult to see at the best of times, but he didn't think his eyesight had gone that bad. He removed his half-moon spectacles from his tunic pocket and shoved them onto the bridge of his nose, then peered at the clock again. The reason for the blurring became apparent.

**Didn't these people know he had a tight timetable to keep? If everyone kept him waiting before they deigned to show, there would be chaos throughout the multiverse.**

Oscar, his pet owl and soul-mate, was using the protruding central pinion of the clock-face as a perch again. How many times had he told him it was not a bunk-bed? But the damned bird would insist on sleeping there.

As if realising he was an object of displeasure, Oscar shifted in his sleep to allow Reubin a clearer view.

Reubin swore. It was ten past three. His customer was late. Didn't these people know he had a tight timetable to keep? If everyone kept him waiting before they deigned to show, there would be chaos throughout the multiverse.

He leaned against the stout wooden stand and rested an elbow on its timeworn surface, then cupped his chin while impatiently drumming the fingers of his free hand against the scarred top. If this was the gods' idea of a joke, he didn't find it amusing. Running W & M was hard enough without Them playing Their stupid little pranks. This job was certainly not turning out to be the cushy number he'd expected when he'd volunteered for the post after old Wally Martin had passed on. Not that Wally had died; he'd decided to pass on responsibility for the shop to someone else and run off with some young slapper from Garthvalen.

In his ignorance, Reubin thought he would be sent to far-flung worlds, mysterious places, have time for sightseeing trips, mingle with heroes and demi-gods. In short, he would have a ball. However, as often happens, reality reared up and kicked him in the orbs of life, completely buggering his fantasies.

For the past two hundred years he'd been sent hither and thither at the whim of the gods

Click here to continue on page 27

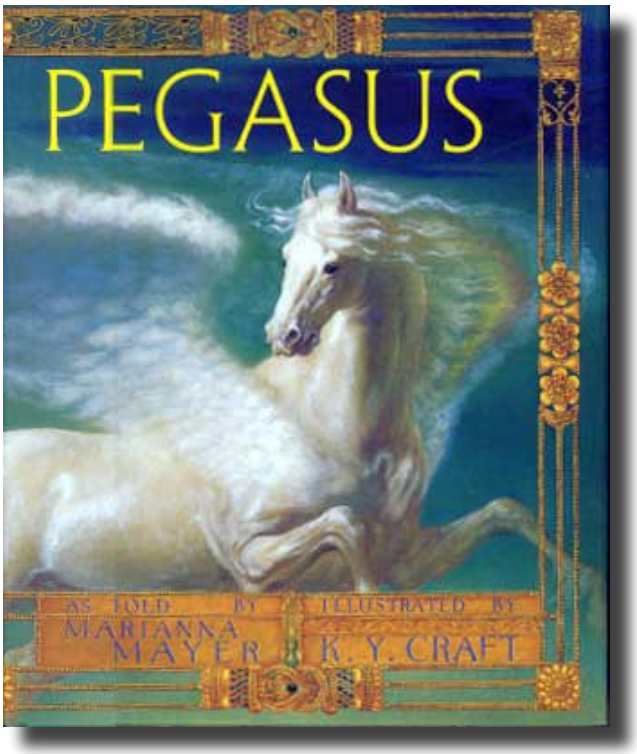
# Feature Artist
# Kinuko Craft

**Name:** Kinuko Y. Craft
**Residence:** Connecticut
**Marital Status:** Married
**Hobbies:** Same as work
**Favourite Authors:** Sigrid Undset, Robert Graves, Alison Weir, Tanis Lee, Mark Twain
**Started Painting In:** Childhood
**Artist Most Inspired By:** In different periods of my life, different artists have inspired me, but I am always mesmerized by the power of the Italian Masters
**Mediums:** Oil paints; Oil over watercolor on Strathmore Board; Gouache; Pastels (occasionally); egg tempera (infrequently lately)
**Education:** Kanazawa Municipal College of fine and Industrial Arts, Kanazawa, Japan (BFA); School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL 1-1/2 years post graduate studies; Various life study classes and workshops
**Where Published:** See website
**Where to Buy Artwork or Contact:** www.duirwaighgallery.com; www.booksofwonder.com; www.fsartists.com
**Website URL:** http://www.kycraft.com

**Q: How did you come to be an artist?**

A: From the time I was a little child, light and color always fascinated me. I drew on any available surface and when I was scolded for it, stole my sister's craypas when they took mine away. My grandfather, who was a master at Calligraphy, encouraged me and allowed me to look at his books on European Art. My parents gave me paint, paper and canvas and the opportunity to pursue what I loved. I was probably born an artist, but I had to learn how to paint and draw to be an artist.

# Feature Artist: Kinuko Craft




**Q: How would you describe your work?**
A: I am a romanticist and a story teller.

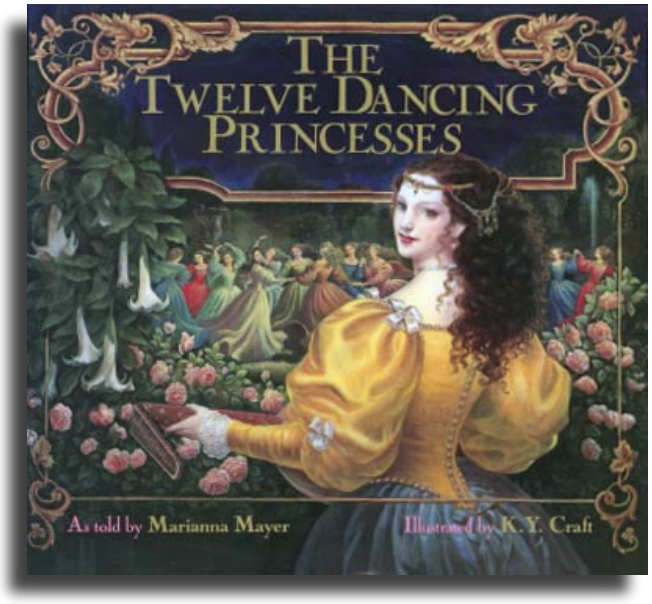
**Q: Where do your get the ideas or inspiration for your art?**
A: I'm inspired by anything of beauty. That can be a beautiful cloud, a particular combination of light and shadow, the color of a flower, art created by other artists, myth, legend, poems, music, etc. In the case of a specific assignment like a Book Jacket, by the story it self and my feeling and interpretation of the story.

**Q: What inspired the "Scent of Magic" piece? (Tell us its story)**
A: This was originally a book jacket painting. The story was about a 17-year-old medieval sorceress who performs healing rituals.

**Q: What influences have helped you become the artist you are?**
A: My doting grandfather, for whom I could do no wrong, and a passionate love of fine art. Circumstance also helped. In my earliest years, Playboy Magazine gave me the freedom and opportunity to try many different manners. I became known for my ability to work in a variety of mediums and styles to suit the job at hand. From these opportunities, I have naturally gravitated to what I am today--gradually leaving the world of conventional illustration and moving towards something more personally satisfying. My recent books such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty (Oct 2002--SeaStar Books) are an attempt to create art that is also illustration and can be sold independently of the story that inspired it.

**Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?**
A: The next painting.

**Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?**
A: Other than the Spectrum magazine, and Bud Plant's incredible illustrated catalogs. I'm not well acquainted with the current Sci-Fi/ Fantasy scene. I live in the woods on a hilltop with my dogs and my husband. We rarely go out. The local pharmacy magazine and book rack is the extent of my contact with the market. I read the Spectrum magazine avidly and comb through the Bud Plant Comic Art catalog. Being out of the mainstream and not internet connected, I can't say I'm qualified to answer that question very well.



# Do I Write Funny?
## By Steve Westcott

Fantasy is a genre all its own, one that takes the reader far away from our world of warfare, terrorist activity, tyrants, despots, villains, and good guys. It takes us to fantastic worlds filled with lush vegetation, sweeping landscapes, castles, dragons, strange creatures of myth, warfare, terrorist activity… er, tyrants… hmmm, despots… oh, and-- dare I say it?--villains. In fantasy, though, there is one difference. We have heroes to save the day. No matter what the terror, how mighty the beast, how dastardly the villain, the heroes will prevail. Good, hey? If only life were that simple. Come to think of it, if only *fantasy* were that simple.

We have high fantasy, epic fantasy, heroic fantasy, cross-genre fantasy, modern fantasy, erotic fantasy and, not forgetting, humorous fantasy. Which to write? What do the punters want to read?

*Thinks:* must get a new slant on Lord of the Rings, gotta write the next Harry Potter style best-seller, who is Terry Pratchett, anyway?

So many decisions, so many ideas bouncing around waiting to be put on paper. But whatever style we choose, the book will be great, it'll be marvellous, it'll be the best novel ever! Now where is that note book and pen?

Stop!

As writers, we have to write what we are comfortable with; a story that will come across as believable in a make-believe world, will show the reader we care about what we have written and the characters we have written about. Hmmm. Not so easy now, hey? As I found out at a very early stage in my career.

**My completed 110,000 word heroic fantasy read more like an episode of Sesame Street.**

The reason I started to write was because I couldn't find fantasy novels written in the style I wanted to read--good old gritty Heroic Fantasy—so I decided to write one all of my own, after much coercion from my wife, who was getting fed up of me complaining.

Well, writing's easy, isn't it? Wrong, with a capital 'W'. My completed 110,000 word heroic fantasy read more like an episode of Sesame Street. The problem was, I had no feel for the story or characters, and it came across in the writing. I was trying to write in a style that I wasn't comfortable with, trying to write what I thought people wanted to read, instead of what came naturally. End result, cra--er, scrap. I still have the original manuscript for when I want a chuckle, and not at some witty one-liners, either.

What I am trying to say is, you must write in a style that comes naturally to you, that flows from the pen, so to speak. Otherwise it comes across in the writing, and an editor will soon pick up on it and discard the manuscript in the 'Thanks, but no thanks' basket. I received nine rejections on the book before that realisation hit home.

While trying to place *Children of the Mist*, I started my next book, *Reluctant Heroes*. This started life as a straight fantasy. Swashbuckling high fantasy with dwarves, dragons, the lot. Well, high fantasy sells, doesn't it? Just look at Robert Jordon, and that other feller. What's his name? You know

the one. He wrote about small, hairy little men running after a ring. They made it into a film or three, I believe.

Anyway, I was also reading a book by James Bibby at the time called *Ronan the Barbarian*, a spoof on Conan except that Mr. Bibby's hero was a Rastafarian, complete with dreadlocks. It was hilarious and is still one of my all time favourite books.

Subconsciously, his book changed my own style. Before I knew it, I was writing what was to be my first published novel, *Reluctant Heroes*--out February, folks. A humorous fantasy. I had stumbled on a style that suited my writing. I had found my voice. It was an amazing discovery. One for which I shall have to thank James, if ever we meet.

The writer's voice is the most important tool, in addition to being able to construct sentences and tell a story, of course. Without a unique voice, your story becomes lost amongst the slush pile, there to lie in never-ending misery until it gets plucked from obscurity for the long journey home. You may have to look under the bed, in last night's garbage, or in the latrine, but find your voice you must. I think it is the most important attribute you need to succeed.

If you discover that humorous fantasy is the one for you, you will find that writing it is no different than writing any of the other sub-genres. It still has to contain the essential ingredients of good characterisation, good plot, good hook, good descriptive passages and a satisfactory conclusion. And, most importantly, the writer has to *care* about what they write. Humorous fantasy is still a labour of love, albeit with a slightly manic turn at times.

So what will make the reader laugh with the characters, as well as want them to overcome all obstacles to defeat the villain without the piece descending into farce?

One of the techniques I use is studying everyday life--listening to people talk and laugh, watching how they walk, how they react, what peculiarities they have--then suitably exaggerating when the time for writing comes along. Some of the best and funniest one-liners come from ordinary people who don't realise they have been funny.

An idea for one short section in my second novel, *Bruvvers in Arms,* came from a farmer who took an ill lamb to the veterinary practice where my wife works. He carried the stricken animal into the waiting room and sat with it on his knee. He cradled it and stroked it, while cooing suitably comforting words. When his turn came to enter the surgery, he carried the animal in and laid it on the table. With a tear in his eye, he turned to the vet and said, "Can you do anything for her? She's got to be well enough to go the butcher's next week."

Priceless.

The passage I came up with from that experience was when one of our heroes is captured by the bad guys and takes a severe beating. His companions are shocked by the mauling he has taken and one of them says that he looks dead. The leader of the mob replies, "Don't worry yerself. We'll keep him alive long enough to kill him later."

Another line I used was one overheard in a bar. A drunk, seeing his equally drunken mate trying to bag off with a cross between an orang-utan and a puffa fish, shouted out, "Yer must be blind, man. She's so ugly even the tide wouldn't take her out!" After wiping tears of laughter from my eyes, I noted it down for future use.

They are examples of everyday situations that can be transposed into a humorous writer's dream. My advice is to watch, listen and learn. Then use to your best advantage.

People-watching is also a valuable source of inspiration, if you don't get locked up for being some sort of pervert, that is. You may spot two or three guys who all have different idiosyncrasies, each unique and amusing. Why not combine them into one, suitably exaggerated character? You read an amusing story of life in the newspaper; why not adapt it for the novel? While at it, why not create a story to lead up to the ludicrous situation? The chance to entertain via humour is all around us. All

we have to do is take notice.

One trap that can be easily sprung on the humorist is writing a novel filled with jokes that are loosely connected by a story. Quite quickly, the whole thing becomes bogged down and boring, especially when the jokes run out and you rely on ones that Noah would have been ashamed of.

There is a fine line between humorous fantasy and comedic fantasy. To me, humorous fantasy is written by authors like Terry Pratchet, James Bibby, Tom Holt, and Robert Rankin, to name but a few. Novels that contain a good story are well plotted, hold your interest until the end, and give you a few laughs along the way. Comedic fantasy falls into the *Bored of the Rings* and the *Barry Trotter* ranks. Small, uninspired, joke-filled tomes. Once read, quickly forgotten. That is, if you manage to read them all the way through before terminal boredom takes its toll.

Fantasy, like most genres, can become too serious at times, so it is nice to put a bit of fun into it. But remember, even humorous fantasy has to be a story that grabs the reader's interest and holds it. One day I may write a straight fantasy, but at the moment I am having too much fun writing humour. Life can be serious enough on its own, and we all need a laugh, don't we?

*Steve Westcott is the author of* Birth of a Hero, *featured in this issue. He is also the recently published author of the novel* Reluctant Heroes. Read an interview *with Scott in this issue, or visit his website at:* http://www.stevewestcott.com/.

# Meet the author of Reluctant Heroes, Steve Westcott

*Steve, thanks for sharing your unpublished short story, Birth of A Hero, with us. You mention in your article that Ronan the Barbarian inspired you to write humorous fantasy. What was it about that book and its humour that appealed to you?*

When I first started to write, it was with the idea of becoming the next David Gemmell. Unfortunately, I never had the technique or voice for writing heroic fantasy. I only discovered this fact, or rather, admitted it to myself, when I bought and read *Ronan the Barbarian*. I was halfway through writing my second heroic fantasy, *Reluctant Heroes*, at the time. *Ronan* was so funny that I stopped my own writing until I had finished reading it, which took three days. The author, James Bibby, wrote a fully plotted, flowing story that was hilarious. His characters were fully-rounded and believable, in an absurd kind of way, and he incorporated all the elements of a good novel, but used humour as his tool to convey the story. I've read plenty of Terry Pratchet and Tom Holt, renowned humorists, but James Bibby's book was totally different. I find Pratchett deviates from the main plot line too often in some of his novels in order to include a witty aside, thus making the read jumpy and erratic. Mister Bibby's, however, stuck to the theme of the novel like a true epic fantasy, only it was funny in a down to earth kind of way, and I was immediately drawn to the style.

*When you then decided to incorporate humour into your fantasy, how did it change Reluctant Heroes, which you were writing at the time?*

I never intentionally included humour in my writing after reading Ronan, but when next I put pen to paper, subconsciously, I found myself including funny asides. Then, my characters developed strange quirks and comedic bit-part players entered the tale. Before I knew it, humour had inserted itself into my heroic fantasy. Not at all what I was intending. The end result was a mess. It was a half-serious, half-humorous fantasy novel. So, I had a decision to make. Straight, or humorous? It was at that point I realised my natural voice was humour, and started the rewrites. After three or four attempts, I got it to where I wanted it to be and sent it out. The first publisher I sent the final rewritten version to offered me a contract. I must admit though, being a member of an on-line writing workshop certainly helped me hone my writing skills prior to sending the manuscript out. I don't think that you can ever stop learning or improving your writing, but being a member of such a group certainly gives you a feel for what people like, and gives you a fair idea how readers will react to your writing.

*What was it about switching to humour that made you realize it was a better authorial voice for you? What was it about your humorous writing, specifically, that changed your mind?*

Switching to writing humour was like walking into a darkened room and thumbing the light switch. Everything suddenly became clear. I could still tell the story but, hopefully, offer enhanced entertainment along the way. And I love writing humour. I struggle less over more serious, descriptive passages and the prose flows far easier. I get a sense of fulfilment when I finish chapters, and even laugh at some of the funnies I include. I know, I'm a bit strange, but it is an enjoyable sub-genre to write and I find it shows in my writing. Also, if I can make others smile or chuckle when they read my work, it becomes more worthwhile.

*How do you judge whether a bit of humour will work for a wide audience and not just, say, make your mom laugh?*

To be honest, that is not something that I think about. I write what comes naturally--set pieces, scenes, one-liners etc. that I *feel* are funny. I believe that if you try to write what you *think* will make others laugh you will fail, mainly because it will come across as forced or contrived, and not natural. You have to be yourself when you write, and not try to write in a manner that you think editors will want. Too many budding authors, in my humble opinion, fall into that trap. 'Be yourself' is a good motto to have, says I.

*Do you find that writing humour has in any way allowed you to address topics in fantasy that otherwise "serious" fantasists may not be able to? How and why?*

Probably, to the first part of the question. When written tastefully, you can poke fun at politics, religion, sex and just about anything else that takes your fancy. Get it wrong, however, and you risk alienating certain sections of your readership, which would be disastrous for future book sales. I think that when you do have a jibe at a potentially touchy subject, you have to be careful not to turn it into something destructive. Even though you may have strong political, religious or sexual views, it is best not to use your work as a soapbox to spout forth. Although I am sure that my writing is influenced by my own, personal opinions to some degree.

Talking about opinions; to me heroes are poor unfortunates who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but make the best of the given situation. They turn out heroes without really realising they are. I don't think heroes are born to be so, they are created by circumstance. For my liking, too many fantasies contain heroes who are long lost sons or daughters of kings, legendary heroes or suchlike. Why can't the ordinary, common man be one?

*Conversely, have you found that writing humorous fantasy in any way restricts you from writing about certain topics or events? Such as a serious scene?*

In humour, you can still have serious scenes, and I do. Heck, I even have serious chapters. I think that you need to have some seriousness in the book to contrast with the humorous passages. That is the beauty of humorous fantasy as opposed to comedic fantasy. With humour you can play with the readers' emotions, make them smile, chuckle, laugh, feel fear, tension, pain, the lot. With comedic fantasy you have to have a funny every other line, which becomes tedious to read after a while and is damn difficult to add any sort of serious passage into. Up to now, and I am well into my third novel, I haven't found a topic that I couldn't write about because I write humour.

# Interview: Steve Westcott

*In your article you suggest combining several character traits into one "suitably exaggerated character." How do you keep from making your characters so exaggerated that they might be too over the top for readers?*

Some of my characters are over the top, but they tend to be bit-part players. You can have some real fun with those guys. The main protagonists tend to be a mix of more serious characters that get involved in humorous situations, and slightly comic characters that cause the problems in the first place. A good example of what I mean is Sid the Sloth in the film *Ice Age*. He adds the comic element while Herman the Mammoth and Diego the Tiger end up in all sorts of bother because of his antics. Actually, *Ice Age* is an excellent example of humour as opposed to outright comedy. It is a serious story, but written with humour. You get taken on a ride of emotions throughout the film. I even had a tear in my eye at one point, before yet another humorous episode with Sid had me laughing. That is the beauty of humour--you are not restricted in what, or how, you write.

*In your opinion, how is a humorous fantasy novel different from, say, authors who just inject some humour into their more serious work?*

When humour is injected into a more serious piece it reads like events in everyday life. No one goes throughout the day without being made to laugh by someone, do they? So why shouldn't serious novels have characters give a witty aside, or who laugh when someone trips over a brick and falls flat on their face? Whereas humorous novels tend to amuse the reader in the telling and are written in a more light-hearted manner.

*Where can readers get their hands on your new book?*

Ooo! A chance to advertise my work, hey? Well, here goes. On the Internet, the book can be bought from Amazon UK or direct from my publishers. If you live in the USA or Canada, the UK Amazon doesn't ship across, apparently, so it would be advisable to order direct from Pegasus, as they ship to anywhere in the world. The links are below.

http://www.amazon.co.uk

http://www.pegasuspublishers.com

As to bookshops, *Reluctant Heroes* has just been accepted by W. H. Smith, the UK's largest chain of book and stationary stores, for stockage in all of its outlets. All 550 of them! I was dumbstruck when I received the phone call to say the book had received approval for national stockage. W. H. Smith is very particular about what they accept to sell, and, as they own a major publishing house themselves, to get a book on their shelves from a competitor takes some doing. They are even holding a book launch for me at the local store here on the Isle of Man. That event is taking place mid-February, and I am really looking forward to it. Hopefully, it will be the first of many to come.

# Magic Chicken
## By M. Thomas

Dread Amadogwa arrived in the village of Entimido late on a Thursday evening and promptly announced his intention to pillage and plunder. The villagers blinked. Then several hands went up.

"Yes, you there, in the back," Amadogwa growled.

"What for?" asked the man.

Amadogwa rolled his eyes. "To rob you of your most precious things."

The villagers looked around at their hovels. No one laughed, but someone in the back sniggered. Another hand went up.

"Ooh, ooh, pick me!"

Amadogwa sighed and pointed. The brave idiot stepped forward.

"We haven't got anything precious. This village is a sty," the man lisped through a few missing teeth.

Amadogwa watched several shoulders stiffen.

"That's not true. Keep my house clean as any other."

"I've got the old blanket my mother sewed. It's got the neatest stitches you'd ever want to see. That's precious."

Amadogwa felt some clarification was in order. These were obviously the most stupid people in the land.

"No," he said slowly. "Your precious things. Coins. Gold. Jewels. Fabric. Virgins."

"Sorry." The village mayor stepped forward, bobbing his dried-apple face. "You just missed the last one. She left with a knight from the city."

**Dread Amadogwa arrived in the village of Entimido late on a Thursday evening and promptly announced his intention to pillage and plunder. The villagers blinked. Then several hands went up.**

"Nice boy," someone murmured. "Came to slay the dragon." Heads nodded.

The last tenuous thread of Amadogwa's patience snapped with a twang. He narrowed his eyes.

"Precious things!" he shouted, raising a fist. "Gold! Fabrics! All the crusty religious relics and family heirlooms you people ferret away under the floorboards! Here! In the square! By morning!" Then he whirled around so that his cloak swirled dramatically, just as he had practiced, and stormed off to his camp outside the village.

"Tough crowd," his General noted, keeping stride with him.

Amadogwa glanced over at the old man. "Remind me again why I took up being a warlord instead of raising pigs like I wanted."

General Maehem scratched his chin. "You said something about your mother. She thought it would be a good idea. After you spent all that time plucking the wings off butterflies and all."

Amadogwa sighed. "You know, Maehem, I was only five. I wanted them for my collection. If I had known it killed them, I wouldn't have done it. I thought they would just turn back into caterpillars." Then he turned his head from side to side, suspiciously, and straightened his shoulders.

Click here to continue on page 30

# Ringing True
## By Brendon Taylor

It's Wednesday night, which means for those of us in the Mountain Time Zone, at 9:00 p.m. Law & Order will be televised on NBC. Okay, was televised at 9:00 p.m. It's after 11:00 and I'm sitting down to work on this article. I got sucked into another night of gripping courtroom drama where the brilliant prosecuting attorneys used their wits, eloquence, and savvy to outmaneuver the treacherous dealings of the wily defense attorney and prevail with a "guilty" verdict by the good people of New York.

Why do I watch Law & Order every Wednesday night? Aside from it being one of the few shows that my wife and I actually enjoy watching together (if only a network could do a split screen of ESPN Sportscenter and QVC we'd be very appreciative), but there is something about it that rings true to me as a lawyer. Oh, I know there is quite a bit of melodrama and creative courtroom shortcuts that make the show more appealing to the general viewing audience, but there is enough real law in the show to let me suspend my disbelief and enjoy the stories.

**If you want to alienate portions of your audience, be lazy and fail to take the time to understand what you are writing about.**

Other law-based shows miss the mark a little too far for my tastes and my disbelief remains unsuspended. Not to name names, but… everything after the first year or two of The Practice, Legally Blonde, L.A. Law, Matlock (way too many witness-stand confessions), and many others fail to "ring true" to me. Did I forget to mention Ally McBeal? Yes, and here's why. Ally McBeal was a show about characters who happened to be lawyers. Ally's imagination, personality, and relationships were at the core of that show. Also, in the few episodes I saw, it failed to take itself too seriously in the courtroom.

Alright, my introduction has carried on long enough. What I'm trying to say and illustrate is that because I'm a lawyer, when a television show, book, movie, or short story feature the law and courtroom scenes, I am aware of the departures from reality that some viewers might not care two whits about. (Whatever is a "whit," anyway?) Because I know better, the story fails to ring true and falters. I lose interest, or am annoyed that an author or director failed to "get it right."

Pardon my use of informal and non-technical terms, but I think you know what I mean. If you are a doctor or nurse, you might enjoy E.R. for the same reasons I enjoy Law & Order. Sure, they may take some liberties, but there may be enough of a sound medical basis for the hospital scenes to work. You might even tolerate Scrubs for the same reason many attorney friends of mine enjoy Ally McBeal. However, there may be dozens of other medical shows, books, etc. that do not get it right.

The same is true for any profession, occupation, and trade. Whether you, as a fiction reader, log your working hours as a teacher, mechanic, engineer, plumber, contractor, taxi driver, musician, or any other honorable (or even dishonorable) endeavor, you have a basis of knowledge that will cause you to view material written in your field with discerning eyes.

How is this general, non-groundbreaking information relevant and useful to you the writer?

Simple. If you want to alienate portions of your audience, be lazy and fail to take the time to understand what you are writing about. Yes, even you science fiction and fantasy writers, I'm talking to you. There may not be as many working blacksmiths, cartographers, extraterrestrial biologists, or spaceship captains as there are elementary school teachers, lawyers, and computer techs. However, when you write in these genres, many readers will be familiar with blacksmithing procedures from having read medieval history. We're funny that way.

I mentioned in my writing craft article last month that if your story has a pirate in it that you, the author, better know enough about boats and their operation that your pirate can use the proper terms. I feel strongly enough about this issue that I'm writing an entire follow-up article on it, so please humor me and give what I'm saying a little thought.

Can you work around your ignorance? Yes. If your characters are traveling by horseback and you have no idea what it's like to ride a horse for a trip around the corral, let alone a three week adventure, you can simply not talk about the effects of being on a horse and tending to the horse in your writing. If your characters spend a night hiding out in an old mill, you can get away with not having the faintest idea about how a mill might be set up, or even look like on the inside. But, if you take the time to learn a little, to intersperse a few details, such as the saddle sores that make it so your hero has trouble sitting comfortably in the king's presence, you will enrich your story and make it ring true to readers who have had similar experiences. (I'm talking about the saddle sores, of course, but if your readers have ever been in a king's presence, good for them.) Instead of alienating a reader by getting it wrong (i.e. talk about riding horses when you don't know what you're talking about), or avoiding offense by omitting specific details about a subject you are unfamiliar with (which may leave your story feeling generic and flat), you can endear your story to readers by talking about the familiar details of experiences they might have shared.

How does this work? How do I make my story ring true? Do I spend countless hours researching everything that my story touches upon? Where do I find all the answers to my researching questions? What's my record for consecutive questions asked? 37. Statement, you lose.

With much prior but no further ado, here are my humble suggestions for making your story ring true. First, plan out much more of your story than ever makes its way into print. Second, research the major elements you are unfamiliar with. Third, do not be afraid to change your plans as better ideas descend upon you (but repeat suggestions one and two for each of these new ideas). Fourth, pay attention to the relationships between your characters. And fifth, get a second opinion.

First, plan out your story. There is no better example I can think of than J.R.R. Tolkein. Originally a linguist and a fan of mythology, Tolkien lamented that England's culture lacked the strong mythological ties that other cultures embraced. He did not seek to write a children's book, a trilogy, and a few other odd works. He sought to create a world peopled with various wonderful races, which endured struggles, tragedies, adventures, and successes. Some of the stories from this place, time, lands, and people made their way into print. Those stories were the legends that were worthy of the age. They were real. Or, as close to real as fantasy gets. Tolkien created alphabets, languages, and maps. He envisioned such an expanse of background that when his characters entered a new land, he knew its culture, climate, races, and people before they crossed the border. Then, he could drop enough details about the new land that it felt real, because to the characters it was. What an example to follow.

In your writing, it would serve you well to know your lands (or worlds, galaxies, and multiverse for science fiction), political structures, and cultures. When appropriate, let your characters cross borders and encounter new places. Describe these places and make them real and interesting. Let each new culture have its own history and traditions. Let your characters experience

them and react to them. It may just be a paragraph encounter, but by sprinkling in these details, your characters and story gain depth and you offer more opportunities for personal connections with different readers.

Perhaps your hero encounters an enclave where music is an integral part of life. For the previous three chapters, your character engaged in battles, eluded pursuers, and finally defeated the evil usurper, Frank. Now, your character gets a little down time as he tries to pass through the enclave into the next leg of his adventure. Instead of the enclave being a generic milestone, if your hero has to attend a ceremony where song and dance prevail, you might strike a chord with your readers who enjoy music and dance of the sort your hero encounters. Also, this will expose another side of your hero's character. Maybe he's brave when fighting tough guys like Frank, but melts in the presence of a beautiful woman… or maybe he's also a very accomplished dancer, but hates to admit it.

Second, research the *major* elements of your story. Just because your main character walks past a grove of elm trees, I wouldn't expect you to know what sort of insects like to make the elm their homes. Maybe some basic information would be nice (you certainly shouldn't confuse elm trees with spruce), but don't sweat all of the little things. However, I highly recommend doing enough research to know all about your main character's profession, religion, region and time-period, if the story is earth-based. If your characters spend any significant amount of time traveling by train, horse, walking, etc., you should try to find out what it's like to travel in such a way. If you are creating the culture, do just that. Outline or take notes on how the society operates. Be consistent in these details.

How much you research is up to you, but the more you do, the richer the details you will have available to you. The second edge to this sword is doing a lot of research and then deciding that you spent so much time pouring through encyclopedias, books, and websites that you have to share all you learned. Don't do it. You'll bog your story down and then blame me. I'll deny I ever gave you such bad advice. Here's the key. Your research is done primarily for your education, not the reader's. Carefully pick and choose the interesting things that will enhance your story, and slide those items into it.

I also recommend using what you know. If you grew up in Southeast Idaho, you would know a great deal about sagebrush, a significant amount about evergreen trees, and you would be familiar with the Snake River. If you aren't creating your own vegetation, and your hero walks by a tree, let it be an evergreen. Make sure the climate is right, but use what you know and you'll write more convincingly.

Let me also give you some practical advice about research on the web. Take a moment, after you're done reading Deep Magic, to visit this website: http://home.insightbb.com/~d.lawson. I suggest taking some time to surf through a few of the many links collected on that site. Feel free to bookmark it and troll the incredibly useful information there as you write. Then, follow Deb's example. When you research an issue and find something useful, add it to a research folder in your favorites. Soon, you'll have your own valuable links and find future research that much easier.

Third, make appropriate changes as you go. In my writing article last month, I talked about how my novella, *Mortal Amusement*, underwent numerous changes because I modified the ending after I had written a bit of the story. That worked well for me, but only after I did follow-up research. In fact, it was during some follow-up research that I discovered my original idea for the climax of the story wouldn't work with the mythos I was using. I found another solution that worked and was much more compatible with the mythos.

Fourth, pay attention to the relationships. I started this article by suggesting that my knowledge as an attorney caused me to view stories based on law more critically. I propose that

many, if not most, of us consider ourselves to be relationship experts, either by success, failure, or via a college degree. We all know something about relationships and will see problems in written relationships like a pimple on a princess.

If your scullery maid falls in love with the duke, and the duke falls in love with her, you had better sell it well. Make your relationships plausible, not just romantic. I'm not talking exclusively about those based on amour, but also the friendships and companionships among your characters. Relationships are not always pleasant. Relationships grow and change over time. Let your characters struggle in their relationships. Let your relationships evolve if your story allows for the passage of time. Don't be afraid to add a little love to your adventure. The more complex the relationships, the more real they feel. Life is complex. Also, there will be no better way to flesh out your characters than by their relations with other characters. By taking advantage of your characters' relationships, you can add depth to the characters and the story.

Fifth, and finally, get a second opinion. Do you remember going dancing with a good friend when you were in high school or college and asking that friend if you looked okay or if your breath smelled bad? A good friend would let you know if something was awry before you left the house. He might have even offered you a piece of gum or a tic-tac. Your friends in writing can do the same. They might smell out the rats that you miss, that cause your story to miss its mark. These might be minor things, but as another editor once wrote, "the devil is in the details."

Several months ago, a friend of mine was writing a fantasy story where a small group of interesting characters were crossing a treacherous land. They encountered creatures that were terrifying and highly original. Yet, at one point, they came upon some nasty spiders. My friend called them "wolf spiders." Now, I had recently watched a Discovery Channel documentary on spiders (honestly, I do more than just watch television), which had a feature on wolf spiders. My friend's spiders were definitely different than the wolf spiders on the documentary. I don't know if many people would have known or cared, but I suggested renaming the spiders to avoid the connotation and false characterization that might result from calling them "wolf spiders."

Did I save the day? I highly doubt it, but I helped him get a bit of spinach out of his literary teeth.

How might I have offered a tic-tac? A true friend will not only help you see your flaws, but help you find solutions when you are in need. I've written no fewer than seven chapter ones to my current novel. As you can see, I have struggled to find a beginning I'm happy with. Time and again, I bounce ideas off of a friend, who happens to be a writer himself. Time and again, he lets me know when I've come up with something that works for him, when I've come up with a piece that rings true. That's a good friend. The best way to get good friends is to be one. If you lack literary friends, make some in writing workshops. I'm a member of the Online Writing Workshop (http://sff.onlinewritingworkshop.com), and I've seen many good friendships develop there.

It's getting pretty late now, so I better go find that remote control. TNT is running an all-night Law & Order marathon.

# LOTR BACHELOR AUCTION

## By Brendon Taylor

"You can't be serious!" Peter's mouth gaped as he fell into the overstuffed leather recliner. "But it's grossed over a billion dollars worldwide. How can we be broke?"

Greg's hands twitched nervously as he thumbed through the inch-thick file and stammered what appeared to be a rehearsed report. "Page 37 shows the worldwide box office gross receipts at 1.38 billion dollars… video, DVD, and merchandizing income are set forth on pages 38-42…"

"What?" Peter's face turned crimson. "This can't be right. 'Fellowship' was one of the top selling DVDs of the year, and even though we did nowhere near as well as that Potter kid in merchandizing, we had a pretty good run in the role-playing market."

Lowering his square glasses, Greg continued, "Yes, those numbers would have been better if the original location contract hadn't given New Zealand rights to 70% of the merchandizing income."

"How did that happen?"

"I don't mean to point fingers, but the contract really was one-sided, thanks to your brother-in-law."

"I told him to make it one-sided."

"Maybe you should have told him who to favor…or perhaps the original team should have budgeted more for legal counsel."

Peter shook his head, "Back then, we had no budget."

"Then there were the accounting problems from the original firm that have been quite costly to remedy. See pages 44-56 and appendixes H-LLL," Greg said in an 'I told you so' tone.

**The results are in and the first bachelor of the night is Gimli, the dwarf... er little person.**

"When we started production, Arthur Anderson was a top firm. Have you gotten things cleared up with the New Zealand Tax Commission?"

"Mostly, but we've still got major problems."

Sighing deeply, Peter shook his head. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that unless we can raise $50 million within five days, we're sunk. 'Return of the King' will be seized by the banks."

"New Line will never let that happen."

"You're kidding, right? Have you seen how their last quarter has gone? The only other film to make a bleep on the box office radar was 'Friday After Next.'"

"Friday after what?"

"Exactly."

"But they had that Austin Powers goldmine last summer."

"Mike Myers received compounded bonuses and created his own union by performing all but two meaningful roles in the film. He's the only one who saw any of the gold."

"Oh."

"And do I even need to mention 'Knockaround Guys'?"

"Point taken. So how are we going to raise the money?"

Click here to continue on page 35

# Artist Profile
# Magnus Larbrant

**Titles**

Top: *Rocketbase*
Bottom Left: *Apocalypse*
Bottom Right: *Jungle*

Artist Website: http://hem.passagen.se/snubbenx/main.htm

# TEARS OF MINYA
## By Jeff Wheeler

## CHAPTER FIVE
### Kalisha's House, Tier of Median

Jaylin tasted blood in his mouth. He struggled to listen to the arguing guardsmen, but the loud ringing sound in his ears garbled what they said. Sweat stung the cut the ring had carved into his cheek. The guardsmen barked something to the legion sheriffs who carried him, and they dropped Jaylin on the cobblestones next to a sewer grate. He didn't need his eyes to tell him that.

*Oh Aster! Don't retch. Don't retch!*

"Tear his shirt," someone said, and Jaylin felt them tug and rip the entire tunic off him. The cold morning air pricked his skin, sending shivers through him. He thought about the thieves he had seen and remembered their wails of fear. He bit his tongue. They were not going to make him scream. They could kick him in the gut and stamp him with hot iron, but he wouldn't give them the satisfaction. He would take the pain as an Atabyrion. Fear mixed with hate in his stomach. *Alvaron… Alvaron….Alvaron…*

Wrenching his eyes open, Jaylin saw the three sentries of the Mark of Alvaron watching him. Three legion sheriffs had accompanied them. One of the sheriffs went to the sewer grate and commenced unlocking it. As the lid came open with the screech of metal on stone, a strong, unhealthy smell spewed out and Jaylin's courage faltered. It was awful smelling. He would have to live in that putrid muck?

Another sheriff unlocked a sealed pedestal near the grate and pulled out a poker with the triangle brand and one circle. He took a flask and dribbled some liquid into an urn inside the pedestal and greenish-white flames blazed from the urn. The sheriff bathed the head of the poker in the pedestal furnace while the Mark's sentries watched with fascination.

**He stared at them long and hard, trying to remember each one's face. If he made it out of the sewers alive, he would kill them all, one by one.**

"Do it," the captain of the sentries ordered. "Brand him good."

Jaylin watched the sheriff approach with the glowing red brand. He tried to swallow and asked, weakly, "Do any of you know Carshalton at the Steene? He is my friend."

"Be silent!" Alvaron's sentry thundered.

"Carshalton?" one of the sheriffs seemed to know the name.

"I know who he is," another answered. "He's a duty officer at the Steene. A good man…"

"I said be silent! He's a liar and a thief. You have your orders from the Mark of Alvaron himself. Now brand the codling moth and get on with it!"

Jaylin swore and raised his face, looking at the men around him. He stared at them long and hard, trying to remember each one's face. If he made it out of the sewers alive, he would kill them all,

Click here to continue on page 41

Continued from page 10

to dim and gloomy worlds only They could dream of, supplying magical goodies and artefacts to Their *supposed* favourites and get-shagged-quick potions to licentious old perverts. He'd just about had enough. They could find someone else to do their errands. It was way past time he should have retired, anyway.

Reubin sighed and ran an aged hand through his thinning hair. There was no way the gods would let him. The senile old duffers were testy at the best of times and wouldn't view his resignation too kindly, especially as he'd practically begged for the job in the first place.

The bell above the entrance tinkled as the door opened. Curiosity overcame annoyance as Reubin peered across the room to see who his customer was. He hoped it was someone interesting. He was in need of cheering up.

A young man poked his head around the door and nervously peered in. His clear blue eyes went wide as he gazed at the mass of junk before him. Then, his head slowly withdrew and the door started to close.

With the speed and grace of a geriatric tortoise on steroids, Reubin sprinted around the counter and hurtled for the door. He'd never lost a customer before, and he'd be damned if he would lose one now. Come to think of it, he probably would be if he lost him. The gods did not look too kindly on failure. Increasing his pace to athletic proportions, he managed to reach the door before it closed and yanked it open.

The youth, his hand still on the outer handle, was catapulted into the room and went crashing into a rack of state-of-the-art, dead-accurate flinging spears, snapping the shafts of at least half of them.

Woken by the commotion, Oscar took off from his perch and flew around the room, screeching his annoyance and dropping splatter bombs all over the place.

Reubin cursed and glared at the airborne frenzy as he wiped dollops of sticky white goo off his shoulder. Then, muttering under his breath, he closed the door and hobbled over to help the lad up.

Now that order had been restored, Oscar glided over to the clock with an unconcerned hoot and retook his place. Within moments, he was fast asleep.

When Reubin stretched an arm toward the toga-dressed youth, the lad shrank back. Reubin's eyes narrowed as he heard the snap of yet more spear shafts. It would cost him a fortune to replace that lot--if he could find the itinerant tinker he'd bought them from, or remember which world the senile old coot lived on.

He pushed the disparaging thoughts from his mind, gave the lad a friendly smile, and offered his hand again. "Don't worry. Old Reubin won't harm ye. Let's be havin' ye up--" He eyed the splintered spears, "afore ye cause any more damage."

Hesitantly, the lad raised an arm and grasped Reubin's hand, allowing himself to be hoisted to his feet. Once standing, he proved to be tall – very tall. He was at least three hands taller than Reubin. Not that that was too difficult to achieve. Most people older than ten cycles were taller than Reubin, unless they were lying down.

"That's better. Now, what can I do fer ye?" Reubin asked.

Instead of answering, the youth dipped his head in embarrassment and scuffed the toe of a sandal on the floor.

Reubin scowled. Not only was the lad tardy, he appeared dense as well. At this rate he would be late for his next appointment, and that would never do. "Come on. Don't be afeared. Ye must be after somethin' or ye wouldn't have found yer way here. First off, I'm Reubin, manager of this fine establishment, at yer service." Reubin dipped his head, swearing as his spectacles slipped off his nose and fell to the floor.

The youth stooped down and picked them up, then shyly offered them to Reubin, who took

them with a grateful smile. "Why, thank ye. That's most kind of yer."

A blush tinged the cheeks of the youth as he looked away and whispered, "My name is Achilles."

"Achilles, huh?" Reubin nodded. Such a pretty name for a boy. And such a pretty boy for the name, he mused. If Reubin were that way inclined, which he wasn't, he could quite fancy him. With the mass of blond ringlets adorning his head, his clear, sun-browned complexion and striking blue eyes, Achilles was the prettiest looking young man Reubin had seen for years. Such perfection.

Realising that the silence between them had stretched beyond politeness, Reubin cleared his throat. "So, er, how can we help ye?"

Achilles shrugged, smoothing a stray lock of hair from his eyes.

This was going to be a difficult one. Reubin would have to try another tack. "Did ye have a dream, maybe? Of something ye needed? Then felt drawn to this spot to meet with someone?"

The smile that lit Achilles' face showed Reubin that he'd guessed correctly. He clasped his hands together and enquired, "And just what was this dream that drew ye?"

Achilles gazed at the space above Reubin's head, his eyes misting in memory. "I was on a field of battle. I was bloodied, but the blood was not mine. The Twojans were wouted and Hectow was dead. I was the hewo."

"Huh?"

Achilles shook his head, as if coming out of a trance, and gave Reubin a puzzled look. "Pawdon?"

Reubin smiled. "Er, run that past me once more. If ye don't mind?"

A glazed look crossed Achilles face as he stared to the point above Reubin's head again. "I was on a…"

"Yes, yes. I be understanding that bit. It were the rest that were a bit confusing." Reubin glanced at the clock again. It was now twenty past three, and time was moving on.

"The Twojans were wouted and Hectow was dead. I was the hewo. They couldn't kill me. I was invincible!"

Reubin breathed a sigh of relief. A cream of invulnerability. That was what Achilles was after. He scuttled over to the counter to search for the ointment. He knew he had some somewhere, if only he could remember where he'd put it.

"Oh, Weubin?"

Reubin paused in the act of rummaging through the shelves beneath the counter and popped his head up. "The name's Reubin."

Achilles frowned. "That's what I said."

Reubin pursed his lips and shook his head. "What is it, Achilles?"

"What are you wummaging for?"

Reubin smiled. "The answer to yer dreams, young man. The answer to yer dreams." Ducking down, he began to explore the shelves again. After discarding jar after jar of various concoctions such as Dr. Morphine's Paineeze and Methuselah's Longevity Capsules, he found the one he was looking for and rose to his feet, a green-tinged pot clutched in one hand. He placed the vessel on the counter and gave Achilles a triumphant smile, which quickly faded as he saw the look of disappointment on the lad's face. "What be the matter? Ye don't look right pleased."

Achilles stepped up to the counter and picked up his 'prize' between a finger and thumb. He raised it to eye level and peered at it in disbelief. "Is this it?"

Bloody hell! What did the lad expect, a faloukin army? "*That*," Reubin pointed out, stabbing a finger at the jar, "is one of the last in stock: The cream of invulnerability, as used by the legendary George the Dragonslayer."

Reubin folded his arms across his chest, daring Achilles to contradict him.

Instead, Achilles placed the pot back on the counter and gave him a frown. "Who?"

"Never mind, lad. Never mind. Let's just be saying that one covering of this over yer whole body and nothing can harm ye." Reubin picked up the pot and tapped the top with the index finger of his free hand. "And it carries a lifetime guarantee."

Achilles still didn't look impressed.

Reubin scowled. "Look, if ye don't believe me, let me prove it." So saying, he opened the pot and dipped a finger in the sickly looking goo it contained, then wiped a thin smear on the back of his other hand. "Now stab me!"

Achilles gaped in shock.

"Go on, stab the back of my hand. I promise ye, ye'll be amazed."

"Wh-wh-what do I use?"

"A short, sharp, pointy thing, like one of those daggers that be in the box behind you."

Achilles swivelled, then reached out to grasp one of the weapons from the box labelled Exceptionally Sharp Pointy Things. Turning back to face Reubin, he asked, "Are you sure?"

Reubin gritted his teeth and nodded.

Lightning fast, Achilles struck.

Reubin yelped as the dagger skidded off the back of his hand to plunge into the timber counter.

Achilles gasped.

The owl snored.

Reubin grinned. "Told yer."

"Th-th-that was amazing. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Smeared in this stuff, there be nothin' that can harm ye. And I mean nothin'."

Achilles reached out and grasped the pot in trembling hands. "How much?"

Reubin folded his arms, partly to hide the bruise that was starting to come up on his hand, but mostly in smug satisfaction. "Nothin', son. Absolutely nothin'. Think of it as a gift from the gods. Now, be on yer way. Don't ye have some Trojans to beat?"

Achilles nodded, then snatched the stopper from the counter and rammed it into the pot before beating a hasty retreat. He paused at the door and turned to give Reubin a cheery wave. "Wish me luck, Weubin. Wish me luck."

Reubin chuckled as Achilles disappeared. Wearing that stuff he wouldn't need any luck, just a strong disposition. The green ick stank worse than a Mangovetian sewer skunk's* armpit. After wiping the back of his bruised hand on a rag he found beneath the counter, Reubin wandered through to the back room and the control panel. It was time to leave this world and make haste to his next appointment.

As the swirling mists of the void wrapped around the small blue kiosk that passed for W& M, a worrying thought struck Reubin. Each jar contained enough cream to completely cover the body of an average-size human. Being as Achilles was a tall lad, and that Reubin had used a finger-full to demonstrate its properties, Achilles would not have enough to completely protect his body. He would end up with a small patch of vulnerability.

Reubin shook his head and punched the *ready* code into the console. As long as Achilles started at the top, he shouldn't have anything to worry about.

* Mangovetian sewer skunk: A rather small, long-bodied, short-legged species of skunk from the world of Mangovia that is commonly found around sewer outlets.

## The End

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 19
"That's strictly on the hush-hush, of course."

"Right." Maehem nodded.

"Anything left on my to-do list today?"

Maehem pulled a small bit of parchment from his pocket. "Intimidate small village, check. Warn army about local vegetation being poisonous?"

"I told the soldiers this morning. Belladonna, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Maehem nodded. "Nasty stuff. Don't want any of the boys getting into it, or you'll have them jumping off tables face first and getting up again to go another round. I've seen it happen. Even a small dose will have you thinking you're in another place altogether. And possibly that you've got wings, too. Your dye is running."

Amadogwa reached up to feel the slow ooze of the black dye running down his cheeks. He used it to cover the girlishly-fair hair he had been born with.

"Thanks."

***

Dread Amadogwa approached the square at dawn. Behind him was a contingent of armed men. He could hear many of them yawning and promised himself to speak with Maehem about it. A warlord should be able to expect that his armed guard didn't trundle along yawning and wiping the night-crispies from their eyes when he went to conquer people. There was a certain look to be maintained.

It was the same with the pillaging. Amadogwa wasn't so stupid as to believe these people had anything worth taking. Oh, the odd pot or golden spoon might be pawned off later, but the overall justification for such actions was intimidation. Intimidate them, and word would spread. When word spread, his army grew more full of malcontents, and his infamy grew in, well, infamy.

The entire village had turned out for the spectacle. He watched several children chase one another near the edge of the crowd, and frowned. There was a festival air to the event that he thought needed a quick quelling. He cleared his throat.

The crowd, mingling in groups and chatting, grew quiet and looked at him. Amadogwa made his way to the village square. The masses parted before him, expectantly. He narrowed his eyes, and cast his gaze forward to catch sight of the offerings, not without the old stir of anticipation.

The pile of tribute wasn't as tall as he had anticipated, so he let his eyes wander down, expecting at any moment to catch sight of the first gleam of unburied riches. His gaze moved down, and down further.

The dirt of the square was clearly visible. In the dirt was a pewter spoon, one scuffed black marble, and a chicken. The chicken was brown and had relieved itself in the spoon. It eyed him sharply, unimpressed.

Amadogwa stopped in his tracks.

"Tell me I'm hallucinating," he growled at Maehem.

"I see a spoon, a round rock, and a chicken," his General replied.

Amadogwa rubbed his temples vigorously. Then he considered his audience again. Perhaps he hadn't been clear enough.

"When I said precious things," he announced, "I meant things that are worth something."

The crowd looked at one another. Then the mayor hobbled up and squinted down at the tribute.

"Let's see. One pewter spoon, reputed to have stirred the pot of the gods, when they were cooking up people. Been in my family for years. One marble, pure onyx, with just a bit of quartz in

it. Found in the stomach of a deer with three antlers, or so Farmer Fulhardy says."

The bent man worked his lips over his naked gums a moment. "And one chicken. Yes, that looks about right. All our precious things."

Amadogwa grabbed him by the arm. "A chicken? I ask for things of value, and you give me a *clucking chicken*?"

"Ha! Magic chicken. And count yourself lucky I was willing to let go of that one," someone spoke up. It was the voice of dried leaves crushed underfoot, or a winter wind rattling bare tree branches. It was an ancient voice, still full of energy and ire. An old woman burrowed through the crowd toward him.

"That's a magic chicken, it is," she re-iterated, pointing a finger like an old twig somewhere near his belly. She squinted up at him. "And don't go giving me that look, young man. I raised nine boys of my own, all big as cows, and could still put one of them over my knee if I had to. You just take what you're given and be happy with it. That chicken will give you the thing you want most in the world. Makes you see everything clearly. Now that's precious."

Amadogwa stepped back and immediately regretted it. Who was he to be cowed by an old woman? Yet there was something in her voice, the skill of the scolding perhaps, the sharp little eyes, the prunish mouth, that reminded him of home. And things that reminded him of home invariably made him slink away inside.

"Very well." He scowled. "I shall take your tribute. But be warned, people of Entimido, if it does not meet with my satisfaction, I will return here tomorrow and raze this village to the ground."

He whirled and stormed off, leaving Maehem to gather up the treasure.

Someone laughed. "Did he say raise it to the ground? That'd be a trick."

Amadogwa couldn't help it. He knew he should be able to, but he couldn't. He turned back, feeling his face grow hot.

"Raze, you idiots, *raze*!" he snarled. "To destroy! To trample! To demolish, annihilate, level, and otherwise flatten!"

The crowd blinked at him.

He felt the blood rush to his cheeks and stormed off again.

"No need to get testy about it," someone muttered.

Amadogwa stopped in his tracks and almost turned, but Maehem hurried up to his shoulder, the chicken under his arm.

"There, there. Best not to let them get to you. Bunch of impertinent rabble. No respect for a warlord. We'll just go and see about this magic chicken, all right?"

Amadogwa let his shoulders slump, nodded, and returned to his camp.

***

He was re-applying his hair dye when General Maehem entered the tent later that afternoon. The general was followed by several soldiers who, by the way they shifted their feet and generally cast their eyes around, were clearly excited.

"Has it done something magical?" Amadgowa asked.

"It laid an egg!" one soldier crowed happily, then blushed and fidgeted as Amadogwa eyed him.

"It did though. It laid an egg," Maehem said. He produced a small, round, white object from his pocket, and laid it on the table.

For a moment, everyone stared at it.

"Well?" Amadogwa demanded. "Where's the magic?"

"Probably you have to make a wish," said the helpful soldier. "I heard that about magic stuff

You have to make a wish."

Amadogwa filed "public floggings for overly helpful soldiers" away in his list of things to do. Then he put his hand on the egg. It was still warm.

"I wish–" he began, then stopped, seeing all the soldiers listening eagerly. He narrowed his eyes. They shuffled back three feet. Amadogwa, still unsatisfied, put his lips down near the egg. It was a private moment, he felt, for no real reason.

"I wish to have all my dreams fulfilled," he whispered.

Nothing happened. He straightened up.

"Probably takes a while," the helpful soldier said, helpfully.

"Bring me that bowl." Amadogwa motioned to General Maehem, who brought him a small bowl from a side-table.

Amadogwa cracked the egg open with one hand, as his mother had taught him. The soldiers were appropriately impressed and made noises to indicate this. They gathered around the table to look into the bowl.

A pale yolk lay in the puddle of its own amniotic saliva.

Amadogwa felt the heat rushing to his cheeks. "This," he said through his teeth, "is not a magic egg from any magic chicken. I have been duped."

"Well, now." Maehem cleared his throat. "Perhaps it does take some time."

The warlord clenched his fists. "No. They've been making fun of me since I got here. I know it. I heard them behind my back. I hear you *all* behind my back." He glared around. The soldiers shuffled back again, wide-eyed.

"Think I can't be a warlord, do you?" Amadogwa began to pace. "Think I'm some softy from the farm, some naif with no sense, got pig manure in my brain, I suppose? Well? Well?"

Someone whispered, "Nie-eef? That some kind of elf? Only I'd have thought twice about joining up if he was an elf. I've heard about them."

Amadgowa whirled and struck the table, sending the egg to the floor. "Naif, you idiots, *naif*! Why am I the only person around here with a grasp of rudimentary vocabulary?"

General Maehem burst into action. "Well, you can see he's upset so let's all move along now boys, just move along." He quickly shooed the men from the tent.

"And somebody kill that chicken! No, better yet." Amadogwa felt himself losing control quickly, but was helpless to stop it. "Somebody cook me that chicken. I want it for dinner tonight. And tomorrow, we destroy Entimido!"

A ragged cheer went up outside the tent. Maehem sat down on Amadogwa's cot.

"That'll make them feel better," he said. "They could use a good razing, to let off some steam. The boys have been a little tense lately."

"Yes." The warlord sighed and sat down in a chair. "So have I. And it's not that I don't sympathize with them. I mean, if I could answer every request in the box, I would."

He pointed to the small wooden box near his cot. Maehem had suggested it. It was full of scraps of parchment that said things like "we otter go kill some peeples," and "when we gonna get a deesent cook around here becuz Lemuel culd make tar of good chocolate and I'm sick to death of beans and turnips."

"You're a good warlord," Maehem soothed. "The best a man could hope for. Why, in my day, you couldn't get a warlord to bother with boots, much less buy socks for all the boys like you did last Wintide."

"Well," Amadogwa shrugged, "I like to do nice things on the holidays."

Maehem cleared his throat. Amadogwa looked at him. He knew when Maehem cleared his throat, it was because the man had something to say that might not set well with his warlord.

"Seems to me," the General said slowly. "Seems to me this might not have been the best line

of work for you. I mean, not to dispute your mother or anything, but a warlord, well…I've worked for quite a few of them, y'see. And you, Amadogwa, you just don't fit the mold. Most warlords wouldn't give people a chance to pile up their loot, for example. They'd just ride in and take it."

"Well," Amadogwa nodded, "I thought about it. Then I thought, if I killed them all, who would tell people about me?"

Maehem scratched his beard. "I suppose I'd never thought of it that way."

"I'm doing the best I can," Amadogwa said. "There are so many things to consider as a warlord. You soldiers just don't know how it is."

Maehem nodded. "You're probably right."

That night Amadogwa feasted on chicken. It was overcooked. He chewed it stoically while considering his morning attack on Entimido. Then he went to bed and dreamed.

His mother wore a purple dress and a crown of pork chops. She stood over him while he fed the pigs.

"You're to be a great warlord," she said.

Amadogwa, as he had been so many years ago, nodded obediently. Inside himself he quietly stashed away all hopes of having a successful pig

farm. He had some grand ideas for ham.

"Your father was a warlord. His father before him. You should be a warlord. Especially because of that business with the butterflies," she said. Then she took off her crown, spit on it, and rubbed it with the sleeve of her dress.

"Yes, Mother," he said.

"And you're not to mess around with any more of the hams. Covering them with salt. Who ever heard such a thing?"

"I read it in a book. It's supposed to keep them fresh."

"Nonsense. Ham goes bad. That's the way it is. The way it always has been. Some people across the kingdom want fresh ham, they can just get their own pig-farmers. That'll be enough reading out of you, boy."

But she had been wrong and would not admit it, even as their farm withered and the farms of those around them, those shipping ham to places where pigs could not be raised, flourished.

Amadogwa got up out of his cot, somehow aware he did so, without being able to stop himself. He wandered outside his tent, ignoring the questions of his guards. He picked up a bucket of what seemed to him to be slop, but was in fact his own night-privy, and moved to the right where the pen would have been. Then he began feeding the hogs, to the general dismay of the men bedded down around the campfire.

By the time General Maehem was roused and came to see for himself, Amadogwa was mending an imaginary fence and singing out loud. He had stripped off his shirt, and was shoveling a new post-hole with his sword.

"Maehem!" he cried. "The sow's just had a litter. Got to expand this pen, you know. Come and help." The warlord gestured vigorously until Maehem hurried over.

Amadogwa grabbed him by the lapels. "It's true," the warlord hissed. "What the old woman said. It was a magic chicken. See?" He swept his arm out over his camp. "I've got my old farm back, and mother's not anywhere around. *That's* what I wished for."

He patted Maehem's arm. "Later, we'll talk about the salting. Get some of the boys, won't you? If we all work together, we can butcher and salt last spring's pigs and have them to market in Down Derny before old Abermay can blink twice. First to market, first to profit!"

Maehem stared at his warlord. The man was wild-eyed, stripped to the waist, sweating so much that the dye ran down his cheeks, and deliriously happy.

"Well, you heard him," he growled to a few nearby soldiers. "Go and salt some hams."

***

By morning Amadogwa was only slightly more lucid. He allowed himself to be bundled up in the back of a wagon as the camp cleared out, but he demanded a pen and parchment. Maehem shook his head as he watched the Dread Amadogwa tally up the imaginary figures of his pig farm. Then he went off to find the old woman.

She had a small hut at the far edge of Entimido. It appeared to be kept in good repair, due to the effort of her bovine sons, no doubt. Maehem saw a large flock of extremely happy chickens ambling around. They didn't seem quite as active as chickens he had known. They puttered around the yard dreamily.

The General watched them closely for a while. He saw that they returned again and again to several lush, green patches at the edge of the yard to forage. Curious, he went to one of the patches and peered down. Then he plucked a bit of the greenery, eyed it carefully, crushed it between his fingers, and sniffed.

He grinned.

"Magic chicken, eh?" he said, when the old woman answered the door. She glared down at the greenery in his hand. Then she looked up at him and smiled a mouth lonely for whole teeth.

"Right. Makes you see fairies."

"Or pig farms?" Maehem murmured.

She nodded. "Whatever seems true. Whatever seems real. Whatever they forgot they wanted most in the world. Been keeping warlords out of Entimido for decades."

"Dread Amadogwa has decided not to destroy your village," Maehem said. "He has had a change of heart. He feels his talents lie in pig-farming, which was what he did as a youth. Most of his army has deserted. I, for one, find the allure of farming somewhat appealing at this stage in my life. I shall go with him."

She shrugged. "Good luck. I hear it's a competitive business."

"Somehow..." Maehem paused, then smiled again. "Somehow I think we have a good chance at it."

"I just bet you do. Men at this stage of life, who find their passion, usually find a way to make it work."

Maehem nodded, then turned to go. On afterthought, he turned back with some inner need to voice the obvious.

"You do know, Madame, what your chickens are eating?"

"I know." She gazed at him steadily. "But if you don't tell, no one else will." She made to retreat into the dim reaches of her hovel, then turned back with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Bet you a pennion your warlord only cooked and ate the chicken?"

Maehem stepped back. "How did you know?"

"Because." She winked. "You should see what happens when you fry up the eggs."

## The End

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 24

Greg's smirk faded. "Well, the banks won't even return my calls. They're circling like a bunch of vultures, waiting to snatch up 'Return of the King' as soon as we roll over."

Clenching the arms of the chair in his meaty claws, Peter nearly screamed. Instead, his body went limp.

"Wait, there is some hope," Greg added hastily.

"Hmmm?" Peter mumbled without looking up.

"One of the consulting firms that we spent money on… after we saw the box office numbers from 'Fellowship' and before we received the financial statements… has conducted research on the pop-culture impact of the film and has discovered a trend that we might use to our advantage."

Peter opened one eye.

"Apparently, the leading men in the film have attracted a strong female following. I had the consulting firm review the contract with Tolkien's estate and we have the rights through 2005 to market the film by using the characters for advertising and money-making purposes."

"That hardly sounds like a proper legal phrase."

"I'm sure it's not. But, we have the green light." Greg shifted the top knot on his black tie.

"The green light for what?" Peter now had both eyes on the accountant and rose in his chair.

"A bachelor auction."

Peter stared incredulously at him for a moment before saying, "Tell me how it would work."

"It's really quite genius. The consulting firm determined that our best audience for the auction was other members of the American pop culture. So, it found two suitable venues and got them into a bidding war. Sotheby's and Ebay were both very accommodating."

"Oh, Sotheby's has a very nice reputation. I think we ought to use them." Peter rubbed his hands together.

"Actually, our consultant recommended Ebay."

"Why?"

"A few reasons. First, Ebay offered to promote the auction in USA Today, and on Letterman, Leno, and Conan O'Brien. Second, Ebay offers more broad-based access. Celebrities from many locations can bid on the bachelors. Finally, did you see what that guy got for Alex Rodriquez's spent wad of chewing gum?"

"Good enough. Ebay it is. Does this firm think there's any chance we'll raise enough money?"

Greg stammered, "Their estimates were a little low, but the high end of the range approached $50 million. They recommend giving .0001% to charity so we can call it a charity auction – for our image and because it will give the celebs a tax incentive in bidding."

"Is that legal?"

"They said they could make it work."

"Good enough." Peter smiled weakly. "When will we know the results?"

"Ebay has offered to host a presentation ceremony for the auction winners in Hollywood on the fifth." Greg held out a contract and a pen.

"Should we get our lawyers to review this?"

"We can't afford to."

* * *

By the fifth, New Line Studios in Hollywood, California had been transformed to look like The Shire in every detail. Well, almost every detail. The large tree where Bilbo had delivered his eleventy-first birthday address was now on a red velvet stage, complete with an "orc-estra" in the pit. Peter

was amazed that they could actually play instruments in costume. And they weren't bad. In front of the stage was an enormous Ebay logo in vibrant color.

After several hours of limousine arrivals on the red carpet, celebrities, persons of wealth, and former Presidents of the United States were all ushered into their seats.

"I wonder if we could have just used the money for this party to cure our default," Peter muttered to Greg as they were ushered to the front row. His tuxedo was a little tight in the pants and kept riding up, but enough cameras flashed in his face that he forced a perpetual smile until reaching his seat.

"You're not supposed to ask those questions; it undermines the believability of this story," Greg reproved. "But since you did... Ebay fronted the costs for the ceremony in exchange for all television rights in the event."

"That sounds believable," Peter said through a fixed smile.

"Stop smiling. You look like Smeagol when he caught the rabbits."

The music stopped and the lights went down. Peter lowered his voice as Billy Crystal welcomed everyone to the show and began his one-man-show dedication to the Lord of the Rings in song. It was quite witty, especially the line about Sauruman/Count Dooku and two heads being better than one. Leaning toward Greg, Peter asked, "Have you seen the final figures on the bidding?"

"No, it was a certified bidder only, private auction."

"Does Ebay really do those?"

"They did this time. I think it was a one-time deal. I heard that the bidding in several races was very heated. I believe Billy Crystal will give a rundown of it."

"You know, I tried to get him to play Bilbo after seeing him in My Giant, but he turned us down," Peter mumbled.

"Was the offer too low?" Greg asked.

"No, he was committed to City Slickers Three and couldn't get out of it. Apparently, he's locked in to that series through six more sequels."

"I didn't know Jack Palance was still alive."

"I don't think he is. They used a CGI Jack in the last one and you could hardly tell the difference."

The song was over and the audience rose in applause. As he stood, Peter felt a small rip in the seat of his tuxedo. He swore to himself that he would never wear long pants again and wondered why tuxedo pants didn't just come in size 2X.

Finally, the audience settled into their seats and Billy Crystal said, "I guess it's time to reveal tonight's lucky winners."

Peter whispered, "Sound's like he's going to announce the lottery."

Greg mentioned something about buying a ticket but missing the pick by six numbers.

Billy continued, "The results are in and the first bachelor of the night is Gimli, the dwarf… er little person."

Peter winced.

Billy recovered. "The biography says Gimli is a stout warrior of a man with an insatiable appetite for fine wines, gourmet cooking, red meat off the bone, and candlelight strolls in Lothlorien. It looks like the bidding was modest, but lively, and went back and forth to the last minute. Although Gimli likes a woman with a healthy amount of chin hair, he'll be pleased to meet this lucky winner, Rhea Pearlman with a bid of $622.38. Ms. Pearlman just beat out Roseanne Barr."

The applause was certainly not as loud as it had been for Billy's song, but Rhea strolled confidently up to the stage and took a disappointed Gimli by the arm. Peter thought he heard Danny

Devito laughing behind him, "Good luck!"

Greg reassured Peter that the bid was actually higher than the consulting firm projected for Gimli.

Billy clapped as the couple left and waited for the audience to hush. "Our next bachelor is a man with a big heart and only three puncture wounds in it. He enjoys the simple pleasures of life and offers to show the high bidder all of the treasures of Gondor." Billy raised his eyebrows while reading the last line, but being a true professional, went on. "The bidding for Boromir was very impressive."

Peter nudged Greg, "Boromir, Aragorn, and Legolas were arguing all week over who would fetch the highest bid. And I thought their heads were swollen after the success of Fellowship."

Boromir stepped out to the applause and had to be escorted back by attendants who told him to wait on his mark until the music started.

Billy rolled his eyes and said, "With a bid of $3,569,200.00, the winner is Ms. Angelina Jolie."

This time, the applause was terrific. Boromir looked really pleased as he strolled out onto the stage… until he realized that Ms. Jolie's brother was tagging along behind her.

"Poor Boromir. He has no idea what he's in for, does he?" Peter asked.

Greg seemed oblivious. "Who cares? He brought in nearly $70,000 more than the highest projection."

A man's voice carried to them from offstage. "I'm always second. Always after him. Why did Boromir go before me? Now it's time for Faramir to show his quality." With that, Boromir's younger brother strode onto the stage to a smattering of applause.

Billy Crystal glared at the man and shuffled the envelopes. "You're out of order, Faramir, but since you're here, I'll announce your bidder." Half-heartedly, and in a 'let's get this over with' tone, Billy read, "Faramir is the younger brother of Boromir, a Captain…"

"Who wrote this?" Faramir demanded.

Billy went on, "A captain of Gondor with a pure heart and a dedication to family." Billy read the name and laughed. "I guess that's perfectly apt because the high bidder is Jamie Haven for $42,210."

The audience uttered a collective "who's that?" and Peter looked confused until Jamie ran back onto the stage. It was Angelina Jolie's brother.

"Dear God," Faramir exclaimed in shock as he left the stage.

"Oh, that is bad." Greg shook his head. "The firm projected an easy $1 million for Faramir. They did note that his scenes in Two Towers didn't give him any macho appeal and that his stock was ripe for a fall."

Next, Billy went through a host of elves, both from Rivendell and Lothlorien, leading up to the announcement of Legolas' winning bidder.

While that portion of the ceremony dragged on, Peter complained that they could have announced some of these winners the day before in a non-televised ceremony in a banquet room somewhere.

Greg smiled weakly. "By my tally, those elves brought in over $7 million collectively, which is higher than projected and nearly puts us back on track from the disappointment with Faramir."

Billy took a drink from a pewter mug and said, "I didn't know it came in pints." His accent was embarrassingly off, but he still got a good laugh from the audience. "Now it's time for the elf with the most. The most pointy ears, most arrows in the quiver, and most notches in his belt… Legolas."

"I think he's drunk," Peter whispered.

Greg nodded, "I heard Merry & Pippen talking about spiking his tankard backstage. I thought

they were kidding."

Billy smiled stupidly. "The preteen bidding was incredibly hot on him, but soon the dollars got high and the winner, with a bid of $6,598,543, is Ms. Brittany Spears." Legolas looked thrilled as he met his date on stage.

Peter thought he heard a curly-haired boy call Legolas a "man-whore," but he was busy watching Greg crunch the numbers on his calculator.

"Right back on track," Greg said. "Up a couple hundred thousand, in fact."

Eomer brought a respectable $1,600,000, which Greg was excited to see. "Even with his limited exposure in Two Towers, he still got major hunk play in the advertising. That paid off. Also, the firm thought him being a 'horse lord' would add value."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Peter asked.

Before Greg could answer, Billy was back at the microphone. "Next up is Theoden, King of Ro… King of the Horselands. Theoden's a king who rules with one sword in his hand and another in his…"

Fortunately, the orcs started playing Theoden's theme song so loudly that they drowned out whatever Billy said next.

"Oh, he's definitely drunk," Greg said, shaking his head. Attendants took Billy's tankard from his hand and redirected him to the teleprompter.

Peter was aghast. "I can't believe it. Theoden has his own theme music?"

"Oh yes. It's actually quite good. I understand he wrote it himself."

"King Theoden's majesty goes for the high bid of $6,255,231.12, to Ms. Anna Nicole Smith." Billy offered an exaggerated bow.

Anna stumbled up the stairs to the stage and nearly fell out of her yellow and orange sequined dress. As she gathered herself at the top, Theoden shook his head in disbelief. But Anna was even more displeased.

"Who are you?" she demanded. "I bid on an old milky-eyed king. Who the #%&* are you?" Turning to the right side of the stage she shouted, "Kim! Kim! Who is this? Where's MY king?"

Hurrying out in a skirt that appeared to be made from tin foil and a pink tube top, Anna's assistant said, "It's okay, Mamma. I told you that to get him the way you wanted, we'd have to buy Sauruman too. It's okay. We got them both."

Billy threw up his hands but forgot they were full of envelopes. He bent to retrieve them and from his knees started his next announcement. "I guess we might as well tell everyone what you paid for Sauruman the White."

Sauruman strolled out in his flowing white robes, muttering something that the microphone picked up. "I worked with orcs for a flaming eye. I can handle this."

Billy continued, "Ms. Anna Nicole Smith was the high bidder with a bid of $2,111,924.17."

Anna put an arm out to each man and traipsed off the stage, nagging Sauruman to let her wear his pretty white dress.

"What does that bring us up to?" Peter asked excitedly.

"$27,193,547.56. We're over half-way there." Greg seemed pleased.

"Yes, but we're running out of bachelors."

Billy seemed to be in better control of himself after the ceremony resumed following about the thirtieth commercial break.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to welcome the man who received more bids than any other. The King, who awaits his return to Gondor, the ranger, a man known by many names, but who is known to every female heart in our audience. Aragorn, son of…" Apparently Billy had some

sobering yet to do. "Strider was bid on by thousands of women and a few men. But the winning bid of $9,214,000.00 came from Madame Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York."

A huge ovation greeted Ms. Clinton as she strode up the ramp and glided to the podium. Smiling, then biting her lower lip, she said, "I will not have sexual relations with that man…" Then she bellowed a thunderous laugh and made an obscene gesture toward her husband, who was sitting between Liv Tyler and Cate Blanchette and wasn't really paying attention. The audience was quiet as she took an unsure Aragorn by the elbow and pranced off the stage.

"Oh dear," Peter said. "I don't like the look in her eye at all. That was scarier than Bilbo's scene in Fellowship."

"That's not good," Greg said.

"No, and I don't think Aragorn will be the same after tonight."

"No, I meant the amount of the bid. The firm projected that we needed $12 million out of Aragorn. He's by far our biggest draw. And with only Gandalf and the hobbits left, I'm afraid it doesn't look good." Greg took off his glasses and wiped at his eyes.

Peter tried to keep the mood positive. "Gandalf is next, I see him in the wings. If Sauruman brought over $2 million, then Gandalf has to bring at least twice that, right?"

"I think he'd need to bring $6 to 7 million with what the firm projected for the hobbits, and I'm afraid some nasty rumors about Gandalf's sexual preferences have been spreading on the internet." Greg swallowed hard.

"You're joking, right? He's as straight as they come, and a gentleman, too. Why, who'd believe it?"

"There were rumors about how he spent so much time with the hobbits, and then there were his late night talk show appearances…"

Billy sorted through the envelopes until he came to the proper one and opened it. "Gandalf the Grey, or Gandalf the White if you prefer, walked the whole of the world and offers the wisdom gained in 600 lives of men. He likes the rugged wilderness and riding white ponies."

Peter was furious. "He's ad-libbing."

Billy went on, "And the winning bid goes to Sigfried and Roy… I'm just kidding, it goes to Anna Nicole Smith for $98,973.00."

A voice choked by a mouth-full of food called from backstage, "I got him too?"

Gandalf, looking completely indignant, set off a massive firework display and disappeared.

Greg folded his glasses and put them away. "That leaves us well short of the goal, and no projection for the hobbits came close to what we need."

Billy scrutinized the teleprompter and then smiled for the camera. "The last four bachelors have been bundled into one lot. The nice folks at Ebay changed the format with these gentlemen for convenience and out of request by the high bidders. It looks like bidding was lively…"

Peter suggested to Greg that they leave early with the money they'd raised. Maybe another bank would talk to them. Greg shook his head and said that Peter was obligated to make an appearance at the after-ceremony party.

"These little guys received the first bid of any bachelors by Kathy Lee Gifford at $.02 per hour, but that amount was quickly swallowed by thousands of teenage girls who confused the picture of the hobbits with 'N Sync. Yet, the high bidder for the Shire's own Frodo Baggins, Samwise Gamgee, Merry and Pippen Took, with a bid of $13,401,000.00, goes to Martha Stewart."

The crowd hushed as The Martha rose from the second row and worked her way to the aisle.

Billy continued. "The bidding went back and forth between Martha and the Boston Archdiocese, which is apparently looking for new alter boys, but Martha just edged them out in the

end. Maybe she needed models for a new line of lawn gnomes." Billy laughed loudly at his own joke and got a few sympathy laughs from the audience.

"That's amazing!" Peter exclaimed. He meant to whisper to Greg, but in his enthusiasm, he said it loud enough for Martha to hear as she passed behind them. "I understand why the priests would bid on them, but why Martha?"

Greg shrugged his shoulders, but Martha leaned in and whispered, "If I'm going to the big house for a long time, I'm going to have the perfect party before I go."

Peter gave her a confused look.

She winked and said, "You know what they say about big feet…"

Peter flushed horribly and sank into his chair. Greg leaned in and said they were close, but still $92,479.44 short of the goal. Peter mumbled something about offering himself to make up the difference, but then admitted that he'd fetch less than Gimli and still have his wife to deal with. "I guess I can write a check for the remainder," he conceded.

The hobbits cheerfully escorted Martha off the stage to a huge applause.

The orcs struck up their instruments for the closing song, but Billy staggered back out and said, "Hold up, hold up," while waving an envelope in one hand. "I missed one."

Peter turned to Greg, wrinkling his brow.

Greg thumbed through his papers and admitted he had no idea who it could be.

Billy steadied himself at the podium. "Due to a popular write-in campaign, an unlisted bachelor has been added to the fellowship. Originally a river folk, this gentleman lived a life of meditation in the Misty Mountains where he truly got in touch with himself. His list of favorite restaurants all serve seafood, and he'll be certain to take the winning bidder to his favorite sushi bar. Tonight's last bachelor is Smeagol." Perhaps the loudest ovation of the night greeted the announcement and a pair of pale, luminous eyes peeked out from behind the curtains.

Sandra Bernhard stood and cried out. "I likes it raw… and wriggling, baby!"

Peter coughed, and it sounded like Gollum. Shaking his head, he turned to Greg, "I know he's popular, but who'd really bid on him?"

Billy tore the envelope and said, "And for the last time, with a bid of $100,000.00, the winner is Michael Jackson!"

A loud "Hoooo, heeeeee," squealed from the balcony, and Michael did a few dance moves that elicited a sorrowful groan from the audience.

Smeagol inched out onto the stage with a look of horror on his face. "Not him, Precious, we'll go back to Mordor first."

As the King of Pop made his way to the stage, a small hand parted the curtain.

Peter, feeling sick for poor Smeagol, watched as Frodo poked his head through the curtain and handed something to Smeagol. Smeagol's eyes brightened with excitement as Frodo whispered, "I think you'll need it more than I."

Michael Jackson moonwalked toward the podium to claim his prize. Peter saw the glint of gold as Smeagol closed his hand and heard him say, "Now we gets to be the Master, eh, Precious? Now we gets to be the Master." Then, he eagerly accompanied Mr. Jackson off the stage.

## The End

Leave a message about this story.

Continued from page 26

one by one. "Listen to me," Jaylin said. "You are branding a messenger of a Prince, not a Mark. When Jevin finds out about this, you can be sure …"

"Another word from you," the sentry said, taking a threatening step forward, "And you'll have two circles instead of one!"

Jaylin clenched his teeth and jolted with pain as the sheriff drove the brand into his shoulder muscle. His skin smoked and burned and the pain nearly made him black out. He felt helpless, violated. "By Aster's Veil, I'll kill you!" he swore and struggled. If he had his knives handy, he would have used them.

"I want his ring," the sentry captain said. He beckoned to the others, "Take his silver amongst you, and let's get this over with." They twisted the sapphire ring from Jaylin's little finger and dumped the silver dyx from his pockets and pouches. They did not find the coins hidden in the folds of his boot, but they robbed him of most.

Jaylin hung his head, grinding his teeth so hard that he thought they would shatter.

"He's got spirit. I'll give him that. Didn't even yelp. Do something about it. Twist his arm backwards and then dump him in. Come on, man, make him yell!"

Jaylin looked up at the man. "Bloody coward," he spat. "Give me a sword! Or are you afraid of one man?"

The legion sheriffs hoisted Jaylin and dragged him to the lip of the grate. He smelled raw sewage, rotten food, and clammy stone mixed together in a sickening sludge that stung his nose and made his stomach heave. He was going to be sick and he turned his face away, breathing in quick gasps. Why had he come to Minya? Why had he demanded that Jevin let him find Kalisha? It was foolishness. It was pride.

Someone was coming.

Down the street running toward them, Jaylin saw a man with red-gold hair wearing a blue mantle and a highlander across his back.

"In the Queen's name, stop!"

The three sentries of Alvaron spun around. Their faces blanched with shock – and recognition. Jaylin saw the captain's hand drop to his saber hilt.

His pulse throbbing, Jaylin hoped there was a way out after all. His knees felt the bite of the sewer grate rim and his arm blistered from the branding, but the pain was starting to fade. The legion sheriffs holding him at the edge of the sewers hesitated.

"Do as the Mark ordered," Alvaron's captain said with anger, his gaze riveted on the intruder.

The sheriffs stalled a bit.

"If you listen to these sentries," Jaylin whispered, "you're dead men. All of you. This is your last chance! I work for Prince Jevin."

The sheriff with the poker frowned and then shook his head. "No. It's three against one. Shove him in. Let the bloody Premyens deal with their own."

The two sheriffs holding Jaylin hoisted him and kicked his heels into the wide opening.

"By order of the Queen's Guard, let him go or lose your heads!" the intruder shouted, advancing on them. Sweat streaked down his face. "If I have to summon my guardsmen down here, they'll be sweeping your blood from the streets for a week. Stand down!" He turned on the three sentries. "Jorganon is a fool if he thinks he can get away with this. Back off!"

"No, Thasos. You're the fool," the captain sneered, chuckling. "My orders come from Alvaron himself. Your rank is the same as mine. Now dump the sop in…"

The new guardsman whipped out a dagger and stabbed the captain in the ribs before he could finish his sentence. The other two sentries scrambled to unsheathe sabers while the stranger drew an

Atabyrion highlander with both hands and attacked.

Jaylin jerked his arms free. One sheriff scrambled to catch him, but he dove over the open sewer grate and rolled clear on the other side. The pain in his burned shoulder was excrutiating as he rolled over the gritty stone.

He needed a weapon.

Jaylin found the captain of the sentries had staggered backward and fallen to the streets, staring at the knife hilt protruding from his body. Blood stained his tunic red. Jaylin rushed to the fallen man and yanked the dagger out of his ribs. "Thank you, my friend," he said and cracked the hilt down on the man's head.

The Queen's guardsman who had saved him ducked and parried, but two expert swordsmen attacked him on two sides. He managed to keep both at a distance with long slashing sweeps of the highlander. Jaylin rushed in and struck one from behind, sliding in and knocking him off his feet. Shifting his grip on the dagger, he plunged it into the sentry's sword arm and wrenched the saber from his grip as he howled in pain. Jaylin looked up as the Queen's guardsman spun around, cutting in a wide arc, and the second man's head tumbled to the ground. The headless body sagged to the street.

Jaylin turned to face the sheriffs, holding the saber in one hand and the dagger in the other. He tried to give them a look as if his arm weren't still on fire. But they retreated and sheathed their truncheons. None of them felt like facing two men armed with blades in a city where blades were forbidden.

Looking up at the man who saved him, Jaylin smiled. He had an idea now of how Jannis Wumsiah felt when he had slid down into the root cellar to rescue her and her brother. Sweat glistened on the guardsman's brow, but he smiled with a golden beard and stepped on the sentry captain's bleeding chest.

"Thasos!" the sentry said and then coughed off with pain twisting his face.

"I see you've served the Mark of Alvaron too long, you craven coddling moths. You're bloody fools. The lot of you!"

The wounded man winced with agony as the guardsman stepped harder on the dagger wound. Blood streaked down from his temple where Jaylin had struck him. His voice was choking as he threatened, "You'll regret this, Thasos. Not even the Queen… can save you from..." The pressure from the boot increased, cutting off the last words as he shrieked in pain.

"Save your threats for one who cares, for I do not. I trained Alvaron, you coward. And I did not teach him everything I know." He turned to the legion sheriffs cowering in the shadows. "Dump these fools into the sewers."

The sheriffs hesitated.

"Now!!"

"Wait," Jaylin said.

The man looked at him, as if surprised.

"You don't understand. He stole my ring." Jaylin said with coldness in his voice.

The guardsman smiled and let out a booming laugh. "By all means, seize your property and anything else you care to plunder." Stepping off the captain, Thasos stood by why Jaylin retrieved his silver dyx and the sapphire ring. Jaylin looked down at the captain's pain-stricken face while he twisted the ring back on his finger. "Remember who did this to you," he said in a low voice and punched him in the face.

"Brand them," Thasos commanded, gesturing at the two wounded sentries who were still alive. He sheathed the highlander and folded his arms, waiting. Jaylin studied him quickly. He was

tall, strongly built, and had long golden hair and a trimmed beard.

While the sheriffs went busy about their work, the guardsman turned to Jaylin. "I'm sorry I arrived too late to stop your branding, lad. My name is Thasos Walkelin. I'm Captain of the Queen's guard."

"You don't know how grateful I am to you, sir." He felt his throat clench and he coughed to loosen it. "I am in your debt. You're from Atabyrion, aren't you? The Walkelin family that I know is from east Abyri."

Thasos' eyebrows rose. "And only a scholar or someone else from Atabyrion would know that." He studied Jaylin quizzically. "Was it lice, lad? Why did you cut your hair?" He smiled to let Jaylin know it was only a joke. "It's always a cheer to find another Atabyrion in this swamp of Minyan blood. Are you all right? Those blisters on your shoulder will take a few days to heal."

He felt like sobbing with relief, but he steeled himself and tried to summon up a little Atabyrion nonchalance. "It is a pity you missed the branding, Captain Walkelin. I owe you my life, and I'll take this scar instead of a trip into the sewers. Thank you."

The captain shrugged, seeming pleased by the compliment. "Please, no titles for me. Call me Thasos. How long have you been in Minya, lad? Your neck is still white."

"I'm Jaylin Warnock, and I arrived two days ago."

"Hmm, the Warnocks were drapers or mercers, if I remember. And you've only been here for several days? Well, it seems the Mark of Alvaron gave you a 'proper' Minyan welcome," he added sarcastically. "After these fools are in the sewers, I'll take you to an apothecary here in Median to clean you up. Then we can talk about why you spent last night at Kalisha's home." He gave Jaylin a knowing look.

Jaylin nodded and watched with contempt as the sentries were branded the same way he was and were shoved, struggling and cursing, into the sewer grate. He felt no pity for them.

"You blackguard, Thasos! I'll see your head cleaved open for this! You craven Atabyrion! Stop this farce!"

Jaylin leaned over to Thasos. "This will get us in a lot of trouble, I hope?"

"Without doubt. Jorganon will have an apoplectic fit when he learns he no longer has a captain of the guard. But he will unleash his tongue on his sister, not me. Come, friend. I'll buy you a new shirt, too."

* * *

Thasos, the Captain of the Queen's Guard, shut the door as the healer settled Jaylin on a chair before pulling up a stool. The sound grated against the worn wooden floor.

Jaylin looked at the healer with close-cropped gray hair and brown eyes as he said, "The cut on your face is deep. It will need stitches."

Jaylin nodded gravely, adding another sin to Alvaron's tally. He did not know many Atabyrions who dealt with humiliation very well – he knew that he was certainly not one. There was a debt to be paid.

The healer applied a stinging salve to the wound, but it deadened the skin and he was able to start on his work while Jaylin and Thasos talked.

"How did you know where to find me?" Jaylin asked between clenched teeth.

"One of my guardsmen spotted Jorganon packing up a company of sentries and leaving the Palace. The Queen doesn't trust Alvaron any more than she trusts her court lawyers, so she dispatched me to follow him and keep from shaming himself again. More often than not, I'm too late.

The man is going to get himself killed."

"I'm missing something here. The Queen cares what the Mark of Alvaron does?"

"Of course, he's her younger brother. You were arrested by the Mark of Alvaron this morning, and unfairly, I'm willing to guess. You weren't the first, and I doubt you'll be the last. The Queen is very concerned about her brother's twisted sense of justice."

"She also sent you to find out why I was there," Jaylin pointed out.

"Exactly. My errands tracked Jorganon to Kalisha's house and talked to a sheriff who had been posted there. He told me you had come under Jevin's escort."

"I did," Jaylin said. He studied the captain's profile. He had an intelligent face, and a truthful one. His instincts said that the captain was someone he could trust. There was the typical Atabyrion straightforwardness stamped into his features and honesty in his slate-colored eyes. Jaylin expected that the Queen appreciated having an Atabyrion's unsullied opinion handy.

"Does the Queen know where Kalisha is?"

"No," Thasos replied, "though she knows just about everything the Espion does. She is aware that Kalisha is missing, and that the King is wroth about it. She also knows that the Espion was sent to investigate the matter." He looked at Jaylin knowingly. "And so she asked me to investigate the disappearance as well."

Jaylin winced and grit his teeth as the healer tugged the stitches tighter. "So the Queen didn't do it herself. Actually, I've been interested in…fury that hurts!…in meeting her."

"First tell me who you are and what interest you have in this. I see you're not wearing a signet ring. What was a handsome Atabyrion doing at the king's mistresses' house last night? And a mercer's son, no less. Are you lovers?"

Jaylin laughed and the healer glared at him with annoyance. "By the Veil, no! Since you saved me, you're entitled to know as much as I can tell anyone at the moment. I already gave you my name and that I arrived on a boat from Atabyrion two days ago. I've never even met the girl."

"You found trouble rather quickly, haven't you?" He shrugged. "But I suppose there are worse ailments you could have picked up in this poisoned city. Like lice or the stitches or leprosy. I tell you, lad, some days I grow weary of its fumes."

Jaylin smiled. "I've been to a lazar house before. It wasn't that bad. But please don't remind me of the sewer fumes. I don't know what I would have done if they'd managed to dump me in. My stomach is in knots just remembering it."

"Then let's change the subject to something that interests *me*. What were you doing there?"

"I was sent under the Prince's escort to Kalisha's house, which obviously means that Jevin sent me. I worked in the legion sheriffs in Abyri before coming to Minya. I won't tell you why he brought me here, but right now, I have been asked to investigate Kalisha's disappearance as well."

"Interesting," Thasos muttered, twisting strands from his reddish-gold beard. "Jevin chose a total stranger. Or should I say the lucky lad from the Wumsiah kidnapping case in Abyri. You're the lad who killed a Keeper, aren't you."

Jaylin shrugged and nodded. "His blood was on my clothes, yes."

"Not an easy thing to do, Jaylin. We train our guardsmen to search the left hand of anyone at the Queen's apartments of the Palace. The rings give Keepers great strength and powers, but they cannot take them off. Now, before I digress again, surely you realized it was dangerous to linger at Kalisha's house that long?"

"No, I didn't. I stayed there mostly because I was too tired to go anywhere else once curfew rang. I was expecting someone else, not Alvaron."

"I see. So if Jevin didn't kidnap her, then someone else might have."

"I don't think she was abducted," Jaylin said. "She had time to take her valuables and still keep everything in order. She did clean the place out of food, so I don't think she is holding up anywhere nearby. She might be traveling a distance, but this is only a guess."

"And not a poor one, either. I also thought it strange that only the jewels were missing and not any of the gowns. Indeed. I've come to the same conclusion. What bothers me is her motive. Even though she was the king's mistress, she was highly respected. Her popularity is enviable. Do you know how she met the king?"

Jaylin shook his head, earning another scowl from the healer for moving.

The guardsman laughed. "Kalisha is a fine seamstress, as you of all people no doubt could tell. One of the best in Median. Her work for the Queen and her daughter caught the king's fancy, stirred jealousy throughout the court. Her designs became very popular and many other women began imitating them. Now, the Queen is the type of person who would kill without qualm – I happen to know that. But I also know for a fact that she had nothing to do with Kalisha's abduction. Since Davin-Noll hasn't named his heir yet, she'd not let jealousy interfere with her son's future. And her own as Queen dowager."

"Really?" Jaylin said. "To be honest, we feared at first that the queen might have something to do with this, but your involvement makes me reconsider. Which leaves Lady Minya as the only one who might actually know of Kalisha's whereabouts."

The healer finished the stitches and offered Jaylin a small pot of ointment to rub over it for the next three days to make sure it healed properly. "It may sting a little, lad, but it will heal it quick enough if you do it faithfully. I wish I could do more."

"Can you remove this brand from my shoulder?" Jaylin asked, pointing to the blistered skin. The scar angered him.

The healer shook his head. "I'm sorry, lad, but the sewer brands are permanent. I lack the skill it would require to remove one. I doubt even the priests of Aster could do it."

Thasos face darkened. "I am sorry I came too late, Jaylin. I too bear the brand. Earned it my first year in Minya, and I spent two weeks in the sewers trying to find a way out." He shook his head. "Let the pain and the brand remind you that you never want to end up in that place."

Jaylin's stomach sank.

Thasos smiled, nodding that it would be all right. "You're obviously not a trained Espion. They reveal nothing – not even where the good breweries are in the back streets. Now to give you what I know. Frankly, the Queen suspects that Jevin is attempting to accuse her of the abduction. Your assignment lends some credibility to that notion, doesn't it? While he's certainly suspect in her eyes, I doubt either of them arranged for it to happen. There is also the Mark of Alvaron himself…but I'm not sure I believe he's intelligent enough to plan such a scheme. I do know he was and still is besotted with her, and that she rejected him for Davin-Noll."

"Hmmm. Davin-Noll Tousann, the Sovereign of Minya and my Prince's very own brother. I don't know, Thasos, but I just may be able to prove that Alvaron's involved in her disappearance. If I can find her to verify my suspicions."

"Beware of him, Jaylin. Jorganon is the Queen's younger brother, and he considers himself on equal ground with Jevin. He would do anything to spite the Espion, and I'm sure Jevin would go to any subtle length to humiliate him. As you see, the Queen hasn't overlooked that possibility."

"She is wise then."

"Another possibility, of course, is the Sovereign himself. Perhaps if Davin-Noll has grown weary of her and doesn't like the thought of other Premyen wretches sporting with her, he might have chosen to put her away silently and then start an investigation. This is doubtful. I believe he

is still very fond of her. He commissioned the Espion because he wanted the investigation done discreetly." He folded his arms. "The Queen assigned me because she wanted to know who was behind it." His eyebrows raised.

"Are you suggesting we work together?" Jaylin asked. "An interesting alliance, especially considering those we serve." He rubbed his chin. "The Queen and the Prince sharing information? That has a certain Atabyrion quality to it – one that I find very agreeable. I really don't know my way around Minya yet. But I won't tell if you won't."

"It's settled then. I know the three Tiers on this side of the Semn very well. And I've been to Lunis and Infidel several years ago. Finished, Healer?" The apothecary nodded, corked his bottles of ointment, and put away the stitching needle and heavy black thread. Thasos paid him his due and then gripped the man's shoulder. "You listened to much this morning, Healer. And I've paid you very well. Be sure you remember that. If a man can't hold his oath, then he cannot be a healer."

"I serve the Queen, Captain Thasos," the healer said. "You know that as many times as I've stitched you up."

Thasos smiled and clapped him on the back. "I know. Good man."

"I'm cold and ravenous," Jaylin admitted as they both left the shop. Jaylin tugged on a plain homespun tunic that the healer had given him. He looked at the doorframe and the sign and memorized its unique lopsided wedge-shaped windows and the stoop leading to the door. It was a place he wanted to remember. "Where can we eat and talk?"

"I know a perfect place on Runners Bridge. Good food, lots of noise. Do you know where Runner's Bridge is? No? It's the bridge between Median and Aster, south side looking down-river."

Jaylin nodded and they left the apothecary's street. There was only one church of Aster nearby, and it was huge and sprawling. They passed it and saw a nice green park behind it along the main road heading toward Runners Bridge. The gate of the bridge was open and people surged through it like two rivers fighting against each other.

"Watch your purse," Thasos said. "Runners Bridge is where the thieves from Aster do most of their looting. There are over two hundred legion sheriffs assigned to it, but that's barely enough to salt it. I lost a week's pay here once after a session of the King's Will on the Isle. The blackguard who did it must have been the thief Ristasker himself, because I'm normally wary of my purse. They say he loves to prey on guardsmen."

They entered the gate amid the crush of people and moved quickly to the walkway on the left side. The buildings were so high that Jaylin would never have known he was on a bridge if he hadn't been told. The noise drowned out the sound of the river. Not far ahead, they found a tavern called *Southview*, a clean, respectable-looking place made from beams and graying plaster. Entering, Jaylin observed the establishment owner looking at Thasos' badge. He beamed with delight. "How may we serve the Queen this morning? This is truly a delightful honor, Captain."

"A table near the windows if you'd please."

The proprietor was more than willing to accommodate them, and he escorted both of them to the rear of the inn, around a corner and down a hallway. There, on a back patio encased in glass, they found a separate dining hall that overlooked the river. They were easily forty spans above the river, and Jaylin saw the rush of blue-green water below. It was a beautiful view, but a deadly plunge. From that vantage point, he could see the island keep of the Steene and the spires of the Temple of Aster. Even the docks of Minya were visible with its mass of ships and seagulls. He remembered Reonna and smiled, but then his shoulder still smarted from the branding. The feeling of complete helplessness…it would take a while to shake free of its memory. He never wanted to be in that situation again. Next time, he would run.

"What a view," Jaylin said, whistling.

"What a fall," Thasos replied with a twist of sarcasm in his voice. "They call the poor merchant fools who commit suicide 'Bridge Flyers.'" He ordered a large breakfast cinnamon loaf, glazed rolls, fluffy rezin-hash and had a bottle of lightly spiced mead to share between them.

"So," Thasos said, "while we are still being honest with each other, do you think Jevin intended to blame the Queen for Kalisha's abduction? I'm guessing it'll take another day or two in this City before you absorb enough of it and start lying to me."

"You don't know me at all, Thasos. I never lie. If I don't want to tell you something, I won't. But lying is a Minyan fashion I never intend to wear. So, to answer your question – I would be surprised if the Prince intended to blame the Queen. I'm not saying that he wouldn't mind getting her in trouble, but he seems the sort of man who won't assume too much without evidence. Of course, I've only know him for a day, so I won't stake my reputation on it, such as it is." He gave Thasos a wink.

"All right, then presuming he is not involved, what about Kalisha's motives for leaving?"

"Perhaps she wanted to end the affair?"

"If she wanted her affair with the king to end, why not leave him a note and say so?"

Jaylin shrugged. "If she thought that ending her liaison with the king would only open trouble with Alvaron, I could see why she would keep it secret. She is a good target for being caught in the middle of Minyan affairs. Not a position I would envy. No, Thasos, I'm more inclined to suspect the Mark as being her motive and Lady Minya as her opportunity. Not only is Alvaron a bleeding craven misbegotten blackguard…"

"You are being too generous with your praises," the guardsman said wryly.

"…who is not fit to scrub a leper's privy chamber, but I also think that Lady Minya knows something or helped her escape unnoticed. You see, I met her at the docks my first day in Minya, and she seemed to be hinting that I would be looking for her soon. She doesn't work for the Queen, does she?"

"Lady Minya," Thasos said with a smooth voice, twisting strands of his beard. "I hadn't thought of her, for she's been out of Premyen dealings for years now. The Queen doesn't have a version of the Espion, Jaylin. Trust me, I would know. Few people know she even exists. I saw her more than once, when I first came, but that was before she betrayed Jevin. She's a real beauty, or was back then."

"She still is," Jaylin replied. "Like the legends of Etayne of Atabyrion."

"The Queen knows about her – admires her even, I'm sure, since she made Jevin look like a fool. But they have no understanding between them. I'm certain the Lady knows all of the secret passages within Shallic Palace. But I've also heard she's impossible to find, even for the Espion. That would probably be more difficult than finding Kalisha herself. If the bungling Espion can't do it…"

"Perhaps it's not as difficult as everyone seems to think," Jaylin added with a smile. "Finding someone is only as difficult as learning where they last were and where they went from there."

Thasos' eyes widened with thought. "You arrived in port only two days ago?"

Jaylin nodded.

"And she was at the docks?"

"Yes. Are you thinking it too?"

"Maybe," Thasos murmured, his eyes narrowing. He stroked his beard. "Perhaps Lady Minya is still in the Tier of Minya after all. And if she is, perhaps Kalisha is there as well. If you want to guard something, you keep it nearby, right?"

Jaylin drained his cup of mead and thought a moment, studying the residue of myristica in the

dregs. "I think I have a good chance of speaking with her."

"With Lady Minya? You do? What, is she Atabyrion too? Should we add her to our agreement as well and infuriate the entire Tier of Premye?"

Jaylin shook his head. "No, she's not one of us – she's Minyan. When I arrived in port, she attempted to coax me into joining her on the docks, and I'm sure she wouldn't be opposed to a further conversation. Jevin...would probably not approve, though."

"I imagine not."

Jaylin nodded. "So the question really is where we can find her. Jevin mentioned raiding many of her safehouses but never catching her. Do you know where any of those places are? Or who would know where they are?"

Thasos leaned back. "That's strange she approached you on board one of Jevin's ships. Surely there were Espion there who took notice."

Jaylin shook his head. "No, no, she was escorted by legion sheriffs. Guyaume Reim warned his Espion to back down or she'd kill them all."

"Wouldn't it stand to reason then that the sheriffs who escorted her may be able to reveal one of her safehouses? But how do we find a member of the sheriffs we can trust, or who would help us? That's difficult, because the sheriffs hate Premyens." He shook his head. "They'd hardly be willing to answer me honestly..."

Jaylin felt his pocket, remembering the invitation to meet captain Carshalton. An idea chafed in his mind. "The moon always rises, Thasos," he said, quipping an Atabyrion proverb. "As our people are so fond of saying."

"…As do Minyan taxes and the tide," the Captain said, finishing the proverb. He twisted more strands of his reddish-blond beard. "Is our luck changing, Jaylin? You did mention that you were a legion sheriff in Abyri."

"I was. And it turns out that there is a Captain Carshalton, a duty officer at the Steene." Jaylin pulled out the invitation that Trillings had written.

Thasos eyed it and nodded. "That should get us a sympathetic ear. You've been in Minya three days, and already you're friends with Jevin and the sheriffs? I think I underestimated you." He gave Jaylin a nod of admiration.

Jaylin shrugged. "This note is from the garrison captain in Abyri. A friend of mine. He said that Carshalton was someone I could go to if I ever needed help. I think that should be my first stop." He paused. "As you said, he might be suspicious of you."

Thasos Walkelin took a long sip of mead. "You are a resilient lad – I like that. After almost being dumped into the sewers this morning, making a mortal enemy of the Mark of Alvaron, you now want to provoke a confrontation with Lady Minya herself." He shook his head and smiled ruefully. "I think things were starting to get dull around this degraded City, and Aster brought you here to liven things up." He jogged the cup. "Like a little myristica."

"I do my best," Jaylin said. There was so much food served with breakfast that he was unable to finish it all. Patting his full stomach, he gazed off the bridge at the mist-shrouded citadel they called the Steene. He nodded toward the spires. "What do you know about it?"

"The Steene? Only that it is the headquarters of the legion sheriffs and the bloody prison of the noblemen. It has jurisdiction over every Tier except Aster and Premye. It is also the first line of defense for the City. You can only reach it by boat, but your letter there should get you in. I've never heard of Carshalton, so you won't know what to expect until you get there. I imagine you'll be able to hold your own – despite the stitches on your cheek. Better those than the other kind you can get." He winked.

Gazing down-river one last time, Jaylin finished off the last swallow of spiced Minyan mead. It was time to return to the Tier of Minya already. He thought of Lady Minya's cold presence on the ship and the inviting look on her mouth. Her words tickled in his memory. *Come, Atabyrion. This is my City. I will take you in.*

He set the cup on the table. This time, he would look her straight in the eye and find out why she betrayed Prince Jevin.

# CHAPTER SIX
## Master Finch's Forge, Tier of Aster

In the quiet of the day, the noises of the Tier of Aster settled and the shrill noise of the market faded. The soft cooling sheets of night glided over the Tier. Not many could afford the luxuries of candles or had the means to stock firewood, coalstone, or lamp oil. Some ate in the darkness and then slept, anticipating the long summer days to come. Many crowded into taverns where hearth fires were stoked and fierce, offering light but also uncomfortable heat. It was sweltering in those taverns, reeking of sweat and mead. But the thieves and convicts of Minya gathered there because they also provided companionship and a place to spend a few hours of the dark night without sleeping or sitting amidst black emptiness. There was always light in the taverns of Aster.

But down one of the darkening streets in the Tier, Gabe Finch put away his forging tools, lit a candle the width of his thick wrist, and retired to the kitchen. He prepared a quick meal for himself. After washing down the strips of peppered beef and wharf grub with cheap mead, Gabe whisked the food crumbs aside. He sat back in the chair, smoking his pipe. The waves of heat emanating from the forge soothed him, making his skin breathe and sweat. Calm, comforting heat. He shut his eyes, inhaling the flavors his pipe created. Good cloves, he thought. From offshore in Greenshay.

Gabe's keen hearing detected the gentle patter of boots on the cobbled street approach his door with wary steps. The glimmer of lantern fire shone under the door. The streets near Master Finch's Forge were deserted most of the time, and sound echoed off the hard cobbles. The thick curtains were drawn, blocking out even the fiercest noon sky. At night, his home seemed like a tomb.

A timid rap knuckled on the door. "Master Finch?" The voice was muffled by the thick oak. "Master Finch? I come from the Temple. There is another one tonight, and the...the condemned asked for you by name. He sent me to offer you three silver dyx...as payment. The Deconeus wishes to know if you will come."

*Another one*? Gabe wondered, rubbing the thin stubble on his chin. Five executions within a fortnight. Some of the condemned offered only one silver dyx. Some begged for the merciful stroke of his axe with their last brass nail. Three silver dyx...not a mean price for a quick fluid cut. What kind of man would pay a price that high? A prim peacock in exile from Premye? Whatever the crime, the penalty of death in the Tier of Aster was meted out as consistently as the tide. The man rapped on the door again. "Master Finch? What may I tell the Deconeus?" The lantern light fidgeted on the floor. The man sounded terrified.

*Three dyx?* Gabe set down the pipe and folded his huge arms. "What time?"

The lantern light wavered. The messenger sounded relieved. "The Deconeus expects you at the Temple before the third hour bell tolls. Can I tell him you are coming, Master Finch?"

"I am the Headsman of Aster. Tell them I will come."

"Thank you, Master Headsman. Thank you!" The sounds of the man's nervous bootsteps clipped away. Gabe rubbed his chin and spat in his empty cup. The frightened priest amused him. Go fetch the Headsman of Aster after dusk in a maze of twisting streets. What fool wouldn't be afraid of that? He thought a long while. The third hour? Radamistus usually preferred to make public examples of the condemned, but perhaps the crime was one he did not want announced on the

Temple grounds for all to hear. No matter. Still, it was odd...

Fetching his heavy axe, Gabe tested the edge of the blade with his thumb to make sure it wasn't dulled or nicked. He propped it by the door. From the closet, he pulled out the sweeping black cloak with silver tassels and a stitched design of the Triangle of Aster – his executioner's cloak. It was the badge that allowed him access to the Temple grounds after sunset. He sat back in his chair and poured a brimming goblet of mead.

Sitting alone in the forge, he sipped from the cup. The drink made the memories of all the men he had beheaded fade. It took away the smell of those memories too. How many had he executed since coming to the Tier of Aster? The box of silver coins wedged near the fireplace was nearly full. Too many heads. Too many memories. The whimpering, the tears, the cries of terror. The death-mantras over and over again. Gabe squeezed his eyes shut, taking another deep swallow. Not to get drunk – the condemned would not want an unsteady hand. Just enough to dull the memories a little more.

* * *

When the second hour bells tolled, Gabe came awake. He washed his face and hands, donned the cloak from the peg near the door, and fastened the axe on a strap around his broad shoulders. To be cautious, he slid two daggers into his belt. The daggers would have classified as short swords to the legion sheriffs, but he smirked, knowing that no one would challenge him for carrying them in the Tier of Aster. Being the headsman brought with it many privileges. He paused, listening at the door. Had he heard something? He was a meticulously patient man, could sit in a spot for hours while laboring. It made him a good smith – and an excellent headsman. Patience – raw and simple. Gabe waited and then decided to move. It was only the wind.

Without lantern or torch, Gabe left his home and forge, turning a large iron key into the lock. It was a lock no thief could pick, and many had tried. The hinges of the door were reinforced with iron bars, making the shop a tiny fortress. Even the cross walls were supported and reinforced. Buildings amazed him, especially the Temple. He wondered what his life would have been like if he had been raised by a university scholar instead of a blacksmith. He hoped to earn enough someday to study amongst them.

Gabe glanced down each way on the street, letting his eyes adjust to the light of the moon. With only the slight whisper of the cloak tassels, he moved down the street toward the bridge leading to the Temple. Most of the executions in the City of Minya were done at the Steene, the prison and fortress of the legion sheriffs. But in the Tier of Aster, the law was meted and collected by the Deconeus of Aster, Radamistus. There were many powerful people in Minya, and Radamistus was recognizably one of the most powerful – and the most envied for it. Not even the Sovereign of Minya dared violate the sanctuary of the Tier. And every church of Aster throughout the City could grant that same sanctuary from Minyan law. Up to forty days of course. But the Tier of Aster was inviolate, a privilege fought for and earned centuries before. Gabe enjoyed its independence and isolation from the other Tiers. He was in Aster because he wanted to be, not because he had to be.

Passing down the maze of side streets and alleys that Gabe knew as well as the tools in his forge, he reached the gate bridge leading to the island where the Temple hunkered down in the silver waters. The huge shrine dwarfed the horizon, jutting from the sea like a giant chandelier, its glassy faces glittering in the night sky in salute to the god Aster.

As he approached the gatehouse, Gabe raised the cowl of his cloak to shield his face. There were at least seven in the Tier who owned executioner robes, but Gabe's towering size was difficult to

miss. Houses crowded on each side of the bridge, but it was late and quiet and Gabe could hear the whisper of ocean foam beneath as he approached the bridge. Six Nasturtium greeted him with nods. The Nasturtium recorded every entrance and exit from the Temple and only allowed it at certain times. The only exception he knew of were those coming to seek Abjuration from the City of Minya. Or the headsmen coming to extract the price of breaking the Abjuration covenant.

"Welcome Master Headsman," one Nasturtium greeted. The gateway was open. The robes of the Nasturtium were dark but had a violet and white trim that defined them against the dark. Beneath the robes flashed steel sabers. Holy sentries, Gabe thought with a snort. Gabe studied the six men. There were usually only four, but perhaps the guard was changing as the third hour approached. He paused, glancing over his shoulder as he passed them. The Nasturtium closed the gap, their backs toward him. Slipping his hand into the folds of the cloak, Gabe gripped the dagger hilt, ready and tensed. He was always cautious, especially when dealing with Radamistus. Of course he respected the man, but he also had a natural suspicion of anyone with so much power.

The bridge rose high on layers of cobble and timber supports. It was formed by a huge folded arch, letting the run-off of the Semn crash around its pillars from below. The houses on each side of the bridge were tall, some two-stories, some three. Darkened windows gaped at him. Just before reaching the other gatehouse, he stopped. He could see a single torch held at the north temple doors. The figure in black robes was tall and scowling.

Radamistus.

Quickening his pace, Gabe approached the north temple courtyard. Normally the Deconeus did not meet him personally, and Gabe hoped he had not misjudged the bell tolls. The Deconeus carried a torch made of brass, long and sloping, ending in a steel wick soaked in oil. The flame leapt from the top, licking the night air. Gabe crossed through the gatehouse and only then did he see the Nasturtium flanking each side of it. Their dark robes concealed them well.

Radamistus strode forward, holding the blazing torch before him. He had silver-gray hair and beard, with thick dark eyebrows outlining a squarish face. He was a tall man, thick at the shoulders despite his age. His eyes were like black diamonds. "Come now, Master Headsman, hurry. The constellations are speaking, and I must hasten to hear their murmurings."

Gabe tensed, looking at the Nasturtium and then at the Deconeus. "Where is the condemned?" Gabe asked in a carrying voice. He reached for the headman's axe strapped to his back and brought it out.

"On the south porch, Master Headsman. Come." His voice was deep, rich and compelling. Gabe turned his thoughts to the three dyx, swallowed, and followed them inside. The squeaking noise of the door closed behind him and the Nasturtium guarding it stood before the lock. But he wasn't worried. One blow from his axe and the door would break open. It was a natural habit to always look for an opportunity to escape. He trusted Radamistus. But not entirely.

"The stars are aligned," a Nasturtium said, meeting them from within the Temple cloisters. "I will watch above in the observatory. If that is your wish, Deconeus."

"You have my leave, Branhe," Radamistus replied. "Take Agdistis with you. I'd like him watching as well."

The priest bowed and disappeared back into the shadowed halls. Gabe followed Radamistus through another set of doors. The inner halls were lit with dozens of tall pale candles, but the darkness loomed in stripes and patches across the vaulted ceiling and on the gleaming floor tiles. They passed through several archways before appearing on the other side of the Temple. There, kneeling on the floor was a man muttering the death-mantra of Aster.

"May Aster have mercy on the blight in my soul. May my fear and sick flesh flee away. Alone

to the stars, I go. May the embrace of the Quintessence find me worthy. May Aster have mercy on the blight in my soul…"

His hands were bound behind him, his clothes covered by the tunic of the condemned – white sackcloth with a triangle soot-print on the front and back. Two Nasturtium stood guarding him, their eyes glowing with zeal. Radamistus strode forward, handing the torch to one of the Nasturtium who had followed. He gazed up at the glittering stars and then turned to Gabe. "Prepare to strike on my mark, headsman."

The other Nasturtium pushed a heavy block of wood in front of the condemned. The surface was dark with stained blood from previous executions. Another Nasturtium dropped a woven basket stuffed with rags before the block to catch the head as it fell. The condemned raised his timid head, the death-mantra catching in his throat. He put his head on the block willingly and tears began seeping from his eyes into the cold wood.

"May the embrace of the Quintessence find me worthy. May Aster have mercy on the blight in my soul…" His chest heaved with a sob.

"Ready..." Radamistus ordered, staring up at the stars. "It is time. Aster's grace is sufficient for those weak in the flesh, my son. We send you to him full of love and adoration. When he speaks, you will hear him call your name. Follow it to the light, and you will find rest from the coils of this life. Find pardon, and peace." He lifted his fingers, performing the triangle sign. "There, Crux and Jellix meet," he whispered, "They speak in one voice." His voice grew louder, his gaze steady. "Ready headsman...on my mark."

Gabe gripped the axe haft and took a stance in front of the condemned. The Nasturtium stepped back, their eyes on the body at the block. The other held the torch close, splashing light across the tender flesh of the man's neck. Gabe watched his last swallow.

"Now!"

With a swing practiced hundreds of times, Gabe brought the headman's axe down, slicing the neck between the base of the skull and the shoulder blades. The whimpering stopped as the head dropped into the cloth bowl of the basket. There was a whisper of quiet before the blood started pattering on the tiles. A Nasturtium dropped a towel to start mopping it up.

Radamistus stared at the sky, his face ashen. "The Sign-Bearer spoke and Rex-Endin blinked," he whispered, amazed. He stood for a moment, unmoving, and then shook his head. "It hasn't blinked in twenty-five years…in three score years before that." He stopped, staring down at the lifeless body on the south porch. His face tightened with composure. "I absolve you of the sins of your flesh in the holy name of Aster. May your soul find enlightenment in the holy Quintessence of his bosom. Be at peace forevermore."

The Nasturtium holding the torch held a pouch out to Gabe. Three silver dyx clinked as he counted them. Three dyx would pay for two months of coalstone. Stuffing the little pouch into the black folds of his cloak, he withdrew a wiping cloth and cleaned the bloodstain off the blade of his axe.

"Take the body to the Mortis Room," Radamistus said to the Nasturtium. He turned and faced Gabe Finch. "A moment before you go, Master Headsman." His voice was queer and distant. His presence alone was commanding enough to keep Gabe rooted to the tiles. "I have a simple question for a notable blacksmith. It has come to my attention that an assassin of the Keepers has entered the Tier of Aster. Have you been contacted within the last fortnight by someone outside this Tier?" His thick dark eyebrows arched accusingly.

Gabe gathered his wits, knowing the importance of the reply he was about to make. The Deconeus' reputation for divining the truth made even the subtlest liar cringe with doubt. But in this,

he was innocent.

"I know that if I tried to deceive you," Gabe said, "you would know. So I tell you the truth with confidence. I have not had any contact with the outside Tiers, save my friend from the university, and he visits the Tier often enough and with your approval. I have done no work in Premye or Median or for anyone from those places. This is my Tier and my home." Gabe looked him in the eyes. He wanted to know why the Deconeus questioned him, but to avoid suspicion, he didn't ask. He looked at Radamistus inquisitively.

"You are wise, my son, for not trying to deceive me. Your words ring true, may Aster praise you." He started back to the Temple. "Walk with me," he ordered, and Gabe followed. "As I mentioned, there is a man – a Keeper – in the Tier of Aster searching for one willing to do his work. I believe he is commissioned from the Tier of Premye. If he contacts you, learn where he is staying and notify one of the Nasturtium. I will reward you well for your service, Master Headsman." He paused. "I would advise you against trying to confront him. Despite your size and great strength, this man is a Keeper. He may seem an easy match, but do not be fooled. Only a Nasturtium trained in the Way could defeat such a man. You will know he is a Keeper if he wears a ring on the thumb of his left hand. You may depart, Master Headsman." He made the triangle sign of Aster, excusing him and started for the wide stairwell leading up to the observatory.

Gabe Finch walked alone through the candle-lit Temple of Aster, passing through the north doors and to the closed gate guarded by the Nasturtium. They nodded to him, opened the gate, and allowed him to cross the bridge. Their black cloaks swished as the gate closed behind him.

After returning to the forge, Gabe secured the locks from within and waited for several minutes, listening. Certain that no one had followed outside, he entered the kitchen, his mind afire with thoughts. He pulled an iron lever at the chimney flue and slid open the ash box beneath it. There was a steel box below it with a key lock. Gabe withdrew a key from another hidden box in the floorboards and used it to open the lock. Within glimmered a treasure of silver dyx, the payments he'd accumulated over his ten years in Aster. Dropping the three dyx in with a soft chinking sound, he locked the safe and returned the key to its hiding place.

Sleep eluded him as he pondered the events of the evening. Rex-Endin blinked? What were the mystic words Radamistus had muttered? He didn't recall the Deconeus ever having done that before. Not in any other execution. The way he gazed up at the stars instead of at the condemned. That too, was unusual. The Nasturtium locking the gates behind him also seemed peculiar. Why were these things done? And in the middle of the night, out with the dark stars? Peculiar.

And what of the Keeper? Gabe had heard of these men. They were men who were not granted sanctuary in the Tier of Aster, because they could not make the Abjuration covenant. They were heretics and killers. Gabe had never met one before. After what Radamistus had said, he hoped we would not have to.

* * *

The next morning, after a good hearty breakfast of breadcakes and boiled beans, Gabe returned to the Temple of Aster under the warm glow of the summer sun. He did not wear the robes of his office. Hundreds of visitors toured the grounds already, pilgrims from different Tiers and nations paying homage and tribute to Aster. It was a required effort, a yearly tribute to Minya's god. They bought cheap tokens of their diligence, tokens they could display back in Median, Lunis, and Premye, or as far away as Atabyrion or Greenshay. Some came to the sanctuary for protection from Minyan justice. The rest merely enjoyed the undisturbed view of the sea and a chance to pray. Crossing the

crowded bridge, Gabe went to the west end of the Temple and found the popular poet and exile Jonas Skelton sitting on the stone steps of Beggar's Stand, talking to a small group of visitors.

Gabe had been friends with Jonas for years. He admired the poet's energy and sarcastic sense of humor, and the fact that he never compromised Gabe's position with Radamistus. They had a third friend as well, someone who came often to the Tier of Aster to hear the latest gossip. Gabe searched a moment and then spied him. Sitting on the fringe of the crowd was Will Valeri. The handsome student from Lunis spied Gabe, smiled, and greeted him.

"Another brisk morning, isn't it Gabe?" he said, smiling cynically. It was hot outside already, a kiss from a sun about to welcome summer. Will had curly brown hair that came down to his shoulders. He was a short man, but his skin was bronzed by the sun and his eyes matched the color of the sea. He was not usually down in the Temple until late in the afternoon, since it took that long to walk down from Lunis.

"Good morning, Will. Is the University closed for summer already?"

He nodded. "Yes, but there is still work and study to do, but the professors need a few weeks to get drunk before we start up again. I was down at the Stillwater near Triple Junction and decided to slink into Aster to hear Jonas recite a few poems. What about you? You look tired."

"A long night," Gabe said. Out of the hundreds of thousands living in the City of Minya, he only had these two friends in the entire realm. Jonas and Will. But they were all he needed. He gazed at the scholar, feeling intimidated and a little jealous of his knowledge of books. He kept his voice low to share a confidence. "Have you studied anything about the stars at the University, Will?"

"I did...a little. I mostly study rhetoric and history. Why?"

Gabe shrugged. "There was some significance to the stars last night. That's all. Do you know what Rex-Endin is? Can it blink?"

Will rubbed his mouth, pondering a while. His gray eyes twinkled with thought. "I've heard about certain rituals done from the Shrine of Deep Isme that involve star-gazing to learn the future. They usually study the entrails of goats or something for the reading. Do you think the Nasturtium do them?" He grinned. "Now that conjures images I'd rather not dwell on. When I go back to Lunis tomorrow, I'll see what I can learn about it. Rex-Endin blinking. You always ask strange questions, Gabe. I can tell you how tall the main spire is by the shadow it leaves on the ground, but you ask me about stars."

Jonas broke away from the crowd and ambled over. "Gabe Finch, you tireless ruffian! Heard you were over here last night making the floors dirty."

The poet was a lanky man, with graying hair and a scruffy beard. He was excitable and loved gossip and lurid stories – the more lurid, the more they drew his attention, much to Gabe's discomfort. Jonas' fine silk and gem-studded doublet was in tatters, but he refused to buy a new one. It was his own way of mocking the Tier of Premye. *Whatever that meant,* Gabe thought. He had never been to Premye before.

"And how did you know I was here last night, Jonas?"

"Oh, don't fret! I hear all the rumors and lies and everything in between. So who was the poor fool you did in?"

"I don't bother to learn those things," Gabe said, shaking his head. Then he gave the poet a quizzical look. "It's not something I enjoy doing. But since you've been in Aster longer than I have, what are the rumors about Radamistus being able to read a man's mind? Is it part of the Abjuration? Do you believe he can?"

Will didn't let the poet answer. "They say in the University that those who study the Way of Deep Isme can discern a man's thoughts. It is a higher devotion than just being a scribe or a priest.

That means the Nasturtium can." He nodded with certainty. "And if all the Nasturtium know it, and Radamistus was one of them in his younger years, then does it not stand to reason that he can?"

Jonas shook his head and grunted. "Now that sounds like a scholar. Just because someone wrote it down in a book doesn't make it true. Except my poetry, of course. Deep Isme may be real – or maybe it's just flash and oil, like Minyan white fire. The enemies of our city claim it is magic when we cause their ships to burn, but it isn't. If you believe someone can read your mind, they probably will be able to because you give yourself away." He scratched his bearded throat. "I've heard of some legion sheriff investigators in the Aureii who can bait for information so subtly that you give it up without meaning to. So we're back to Gabe's thoughtful question. Can Radamistus read your mind? Well, if he could read mine, he'd probably forswear his life as a priest and take a wife!"

Will laughed out loud, and Gabe could not help but join with a chuckle.

After they fell silent, Gabe leaned closer, keeping his voice down. "If you know so much, Jonas, then have you heard about him executing someone to read the future?"

Jonas' eyes widened with shock.

"Last night, I executed a man. Normally Radamistus offers his benediction and his eyes never leave the condemned. But last night, he kept staring at the stars and muttering something about them blinking. It was very odd. This hasn't happened to me before, so I wanted to talk to you both. Now, you know that if you say anything about this…"

"Then we'll end up your next victims," Will answered. "We're not daft, Gabe. You know you can trust us."

Jonas offered a wise look and nodded his head with a grim expression. "An old rumor, but I've heard it whispered more than once so I tend to believe them. Radamistus may be a priest, but he's also a pragmatic ruler. Especially at night. I wouldn't believe that every soul executed here in Aster is guilty of breaking the covenant. That's probably what happened, Gabe." He then grinned wolfishly. "Aster save the poor sheriff who wanders too close to this Tier, for the Deconeus wouldn't! And I for one am glad at that!"

Gabe lingered around the Temple grounds with Jonas and Will, asking them more questions and listening to Jonas' jokes and Will's ideas. He started back to the forge by mid-afternoon. The Temple was so much more welcoming during the day than it was at night. Gabe enjoyed observing the pilgrims come to pay their devotions – and the Temple tax. He liked watching people, seeing the differences that marked each one. Though he was too bluff a man to befriend any. Jonas and Will were enough.

As he crossed the web of streets toward his forge, Gabe found a man leaning against the wall beneath the sign. Waiting for him.

* * *

The shadow of the awning dimmed the stranger's face, but he had a young look and sinewy body. He was dressed in dull brown clothes with a large shoulder sack and a dusty brown cloak. Gabe was startled at first, but he did not change his pace or direction. The man studied him and then pushed away from the wall. The sun revealed light brown hair and blue eyes. He wore a wide-brimmed hat. From his jaw-line and neck, Gabe saw that he was tensed. Like an arrow nocked in a tight-fitting bow. His eyes were intelligent but very cautious. He waited for Gabe to approach.

"Good day," Gabe said, approaching the much smaller man. He looked for the man's left hand and noticed it was behind his back. The man's eyes narrowed and a wary smile wavered across his mouth. A hawk, Gabe thought. He looked like a brown sparrow hawk.

"Good day, Master Finch. You are one of the best smiths in the City of Minya. I need your work." His voice had a winded sound to it.

"And who are you?"

The man smiled. "You are also known for your discretion. Why don't I leave that part out?"

Gabe shrugged and approached the door. "I don't talk business outside."

"I imagine not." The man leaned back against the wall, folding his arms.

Gabe nodded, withdrew the thick iron key, and unlocked the front door. He pushed it open for the man, allowing him to enter first. The room was cool from the heat of the day. The stranger paced around the room for a moment, getting a feel for it. He turned back to Gabe as the door shut.

Gabe offered a chair at the table. Nervousness rumbled as he kept trying to catch sight of the man's left hand.

"I will not be staying long, Master Finch." He started pacing again.

Gabe seated himself. "Where did you hear about me?"

A quicksilver smile caught on the man's mouth and vanished. "I will tell you as much as I can," the stranger said, folding his hands patiently behind him as he walked. "But not who I work for or why. Let me say that the reputation for your services is renowned in some unusual places, Master Finch."

Gabe shrugged. "What sort of work do you need done?"

"An unusual request, but one your talents are suited for."

"I'll be the judge of that," Gabe said, leaning forward. "I don't want to promise anything I cannot do. You understand. You want a weapon then?"

"Yes."

"A sword?"

The man shook his head. "No."

"Am I supposed to guess what you want?"

"A crossbow, Master Finch. I need a crossbow."

"I don't make crossbows."

"You don't, or you won't?" His smile was all ice. "I'm not a blacksmith, Finch, but I can see with my own eyes that you are not like the other smiths who specialize in shovels or pickaxes. You are a good weaponsmith, Finch. You use the best steel in the City they say. But you are also known for your designs, your workings with machines. You don't need a dozen boys to pump the bellows for you – you've learned to run it by water."

"Who sent you?"

"Aren't you at least interested in hearing about the job?"

Gabe swallowed and nodded begrudgingly. "You could buy any number of crossbows from the City. The forge in the Steene is very good. But you are not looking for a normal crossbow, are you?"

"Quite so. These are the specifications my employer requires. It needs to be strong enough to shoot a bolt at least a hundred paces and pass through a hauberk or a shield. Yet it must also be able to be disassembled and put together quickly. The longest piece cannot be more than two hand-spans long and the entire bundle must not weigh more than a few pounds. Cost is not an issue, Master Finch. The question is *can* you make such a weapon? Or have I heard wrong about you after all?"

Gabe studied the little man. Had he found a way to steal inside Gabe's fortress? If so, he was even better than the thief Ritasker.

"I need a name."

"What?"

"I don't work for strangers. Your request intrigues me, but I'll need some time to think on it. How can I contact you?"

"If you agree and are ready for your advance, I will tell you more about who I am. But not until then. When you are ready to contact me, light a candle in the upper window. I'll come for you as soon as I can."

"What if I need to reach you?" Gabe insisted, knowing the man probably wouldn't answer.

"You won't. I don't need the crossbow tomorrow, but I need it soon. I will pay extra for your promptness."

"I will think on it then."

"Thank you for considering this work for me. As I said, you have a reputation." He gave a cunning smile and left the forge. Gabe parted the curtain and watched him walk down the street with an anxious gait and turn in at the first alley. He could understand the man's anxiety. Radamistus normally killed those kind of men when he caught them.

* * *

Two days after meeting with the stranger, Gabe found him again, waiting outside the door as the smith came back from the Temple. He wore a similar outfit, so common and plain he wouldn't have stood out in a crowd.

The visitor smiled as Gabe approached. "I saw the candle last night. Good day, Gabe Finch." He added a little bow to the greeting but kept his arms folded.

Gabe invited the man into his home. The man kept checking over his shoulder and only half-listened to Gabe's offer for a cup of mead. He declined and seated himself, resting his right arm on the table. A signet-ring glittered on his hand. Eyebrows arching, he asked, "So, you've accepted the commission?"

"I still don't know your name."

"You may call me Dragan."

Gabe leaned back. He was in no rush, and he wanted to increase the man's discomfort a little. To make him think that the Nasturtium were sneaking closer. "I've thought about it, but it will take me a few more weeks to make some designs, do a test or two before I can give you a realistic guess on when it will be done and how much it will cost." He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Try coming back in a month, Dragan."

The stranger looked disappointed, and he fidgeted. "A month," he said and scratched the corner of his eye. "I suppose two days isn't enough time to truly consider such a project. I will return in a month then, or thereabouts, to see to your progress."

"What if I have an answer sooner?" Gabe kept his expression blank. He remembered Radamistus' instructions from the Temple. Find out where he is staying.

Dragan paused, judging his words. "Is that likely?"

Gabe frowned. "It's possible. I can get a crossbow to study from the Nasturtium at the gate. But I don't want to raise suspicions. You would like an answer sooner?"

Dragan smiled, again with an icy quality to it. "You're a clever man, Master Finch. I never stay in the same place very long. If you need to reach me, go to the Cleanstool Inn on Southbridge. Tell Rixard you need to see me. He will let me know, and I'll contact you down here in Aster. Are we agreed then? You can make it to Southbridge, can't you?"

Gabe thought a moment and then nodded. "I normally don't leave the Tier, but I can send a message, I suppose. It's an interesting challenge, Dragan. Crossbows are complicated weapons, and

what you are really asking for is one that can be easily concealed." He shrugged, his big shoulder muscles flexing. "I will contact you through Rixard in the Cleanstool if I have any answers sooner than a month. Until then, you'd best be patient."

After he left, Gabe considered the proposal. The idea of using a three-crank system to increase the bow tension had already seeded and sprouted in his mind. It would be a beast to assemble one out of so many small parts, but it was something he could teach Dragan to use. He wasn't sure how he was going to keep the bolts from shattering on impact, but maybe Dragan wouldn't care. He debated whether he should take the project without telling Radamistus. But what would happen the next time the Deconeus summoned him for an execution? Would he be asked the same question?

Gabe decided to talk to Jonas at the Temple.

The poet was alone at Beggar's Stand, watching the seagulls careen through the sky. He started laughing when one made nasty droppings on a Nasturtium's dark robes. "Oh, I could make a poem out of that," he said with a grin and scratched his bearded neck. "But I don't think Radamistus would appreciate that one. You look like a man with a question, Gabe. Have a sit and let's talk about the Deconeus and his secrets. I think I know what Rex-Endin blinking is. Maybe when he's sitting in the privy stall and he's finishing…"

Gabe smiled in disgust and waved his hand to silence the poet, hunkering down next to him. Jonas' poetry was quoted like Aster's verse in many circles. He was the most famous and controversial poet in Minya. Gabe knew him more as a rude and cynical person too afraid to live in the ordinary world. His hair was flecked with gray, though he had barely passed forty. They had known each other since Gabe had moved to the Tier of Aster ten years before. Jonas was already there, since he had offended one of the Marks of Premye with a poem – offending the man enough to fear for his life.

Gabe genuinely enjoyed the man's companionship and his skills and had several copies of different pieces in his house. He wondered what drew them together, for they were both very different. But then again – not many would dare bother a man connected with one of Radamistus' executioners.

"I have a problem," Gabe muttered, and started to explain the situation with Dragan. He did not divulge what the weapon requested was, but he did wonder whether he should report the man to the Nasturtium or not. He was involved with the Deconeus as a headsman, not a blacksmith, and he did not want to tarnish his reputation.

Jonas sat and listened. When Gabe finished and asked for his advice, he rubbed his chin and looked at the headsman with a quizzical look on his face.

"You know," Jonas said, "this could be a test by Radamistus to try your loyalty. I mean, he tells you in the night that a man from Premye might try to hire you, to find out where he is staying, and to report back to him. If you don't, he will doubt your loyalty. I know you don't want to feel like he has you on a leash, but frankly, Gabe – he has all of us fastened to one," he hurled a chip of stone across the churchyard, "like some growling curs! And how we love to howl! Look at it this way. If this isn't a test of your loyalty, then you'll earn his respect by showing you are willing to work with him...other than as his headsman. You have things to gain by telling him. A little extra slack on your leash might be nice. But there's the greater possibility of losing the extra slack you do have if you don't." He smiled smugly. "I give good advice, don't I? Wisdom that spouts and spews. Did I ever tell you about the time I advised the Mark of Morvenn when he almost lost his son to a besotted servant girl? That fool girl definitely had an itch for him, and probably the stitches too."

"Yes, you told me about that one. You substituted the girl for an ugly maid after he was too drunk to know the difference." He clapped the poet on the back. "I think you're right. I should go see

if I can visit with Radamistus. I have more to lose than gain by keeping silent."

Gabe left the poet on the steps and went into the Temple to find a Nasturtium. Within the cloisters, he approached the seneschal of the Temple. The priest of Aster looked at him with vague curiousity.

"My lord Seneschal, would you tell Radamistus that Master Headsman Finch needs to see him?"

The seneschal was also a tall man, much thinner than Radamistus. He had black hair that was slicked back and a long, tapered nose. He studied Gabe with surprise and then nodded. "I will, Master Finch. He'll summon you when he has an opportunity." The dark eyes perused him once more, taking in his size.

Gabe returned to bid good-bye to Jonas. "Are you going to linger at the Temple today? They'll close it down early."

The poet looked shocked. "You haven't forgotten that tonight is Advent, have you? It's a long-standing tradition for me to hide on the Temple grounds as long as I can. I would love to see the Advent of Summer here on the Isle of Aster." He shook his head and smirked. "Sadly, I never have. But I keep trying every year. They usually catch me in the bushes right before sunset. It's tradition now, Gabe. I have to stay."

Gabe shrugged. "They drop oil boats off Konen Dam, Jonas. What is so special about wasting oil?"

"You blasphemer!"

Gabe smiled. "To be honest, I don't bother with things like that. I have an old bottle of Atabyrion wine I can open and celebrate summer my own way. Alone. This Dragan job will probably earn me enough to buy six cases of it."

"Then don't forget to share some for once. Get on home! If I'm not too drunk tonight, I'll stop by the forge and have a sip with you. This is Advent, Gabe. Celebrate!"

Gabe shrugged and returned to the forge. Advent meant summer, nothing more. Stripping off his shirt, he went down the stone steps in the rear to the smoldering forge and watched the red coals wink and sizzle. He hadn't loaded it since Dragan first arrived, but it was still afire.

The forge crouched at the back of his property, inset deeper than the ground. Gabe had built two solid doors between his living chamber and the forge to block the heat that came from it. In the small room, he had windows he could open to let in fresh air and two huge chimneys to carry the smoke out. Both the windows and the flues were too small for a person to sneak into. It normally took three days and a lot of coalstone to heat the forge to the right temperature for iron to become steel, so Gabe decided to let the water-pipe bellows heat it for five days and see what kind of steel he could produce. Shoveling coalstone into the furnace and opening the piping valves to the bellows, he watched the grinning red flecks leap to life and the hungry fire start gnawing at the coalstone lumps. The heat rose, causing a sheen of sweat across Gabe's back and down his ribs. It felt glorious. Gabe's eyes focused, and he wiped the sweat from under his eyes. The fires would need to be fed every few hours to keep the temperature up. He had two huge vats of oil covered by cured leather flaps ready for the tempering. He preferred oil to wine or water, though some smiths he knew even used urine.

Going back into his living space, he poured a mug of mead and drank it in slow sips, savoring the flavor. He couldn't imagine wasting mead or wine on tempering. He needed it to keep banishing the faces of the dead.

* * *

Late in the afternoon, a priest from the Temple rapped on the door. The cup was empty now, and Gabe rubbed life into his eyes. Another hesitant knock. "Master Finch?"

"Yes." He didn't bother to rise.

"The Deconeus will see you at the closing of the gates in his manor house. Before Advent. Come quickly."

"Thank you. I will come."

The messenger left, the patter of his sandals clipping down the cobbled street. The closing of the gates occurred before sunset every evening, when all the visitors of the Temple of Aster were supposed to leave and the gates shut and locked. There would be a crowd, all lingering and begging to remain on the isle to watch the oil boats fall off Konen Dam. Should he wear the robes of office to the appointment? The robes were his sign to the Nasturtium that he could pass, yet it also caused the thieves and pilgrims and harlots to shudder with fear at seeing him.

Let them shudder, Gabe thought darkly.

He imagined seeing Dragan's head on the block before he let the axe fall.

# CHAPTER SEVEN
## Near Temple Bridge, Tier of Aster

Crowds pressed through the main streets of the Tier of Aster and began milling around the Tier walls to watch the display from Konen Dam in the city above. The sight seekers veered at the presence of a headsman of Aster, clearing a path around him. Some drank from mead cups and offered jokes about him, but their laughs were nervous.

"Another poor soul gone to Aster, headsman? At least give him a good look at the oil boats first!"

"It's a better view than we ever see!"

"No, I'll stay here tonight, thank you. If the headsmen are on the grounds, I'll not want to be there, too!"

Gabe ignored them, passing like the curtain of death. After dark, no one would have been brave enough to do that. Several blocks away, Gabe approached Jonas' house near Temple Bridge and rapped on the door.

The poet answered, his face widening with shock. "If you're going to kill me, then by the bloody Veil, wait until after the launch, Gabe, please!"

Gabe smiled. "I'm going to the Temple tonight. Maybe you would like to go with me."

The grin that lit the poet's face was blinding. "You will be my friend until my dying day, Gabe Finch! Hopefully, you won't be standing over me with an axe on that occasion." He gulped down the last of his mead and grabbed a cloak to throw over his tattered doublet.

They walked through the crowds toward the north bridge leading to the Isle of Aster with Jonas cackling all the way. At the end of the day, the Nasturtium drove the pilgrims and thieves like sheep and then led them across the bridge in small groups. Some grumbled and argued, pleading with the priests to let them stay for the launching of the oil boats. It happened every year.

As the two approached, the Nasturtium nodded to Gabe but stopped Jonas.

"Didn't we already remove you, Skelton?" one asked with an angry tone.

"I'm with the Headsman," Jonas declared and Gabe nodded. The Nasturtium stared at both suspiciously.

"I do not want to keep Radamistus waiting," Gabe said. "His instructions were specific."

The Nasturtium waved at them to stay and searched out another priest. "Agdistis, the headsman is here to see Radamistus, but that poet says he's with him. Should I let him pass?"

Gabe recognized the man as the Seneschal of Aster. He turned around and studied them both. His eyes narrowed, and then he waved them in. "Be quick, both of you. The Deconeus is very busy tonight."

The Nasturtium relented and let them pass. "Go on ahead. Remember this, Skelton."

"I fully intend to," he replied with glee.

"Thank you," Gabe said and made a pious sign of the god Aster. He nodded to the Seneschal and clutched Jonas' arm, dragging him through the crowd.

"Why do they get to stay?" someone demanded. "It's almost dark! Let us stay!"

"Keep moving, keep moving," Agdistis shouted. "You'll be stumbling in the streets when the

sun sets. Keep moving, clear the bridge!" More than fifty Nasturtium ensured that the crowds moved away from the island.

Jonas chuckled with excitement and brushed his hands together. "Poor Will. He'll be so sick with jealousy and envy. He's likely to choke on it!"

Once on the island, Gabe led Jonas across a footpath outside the Temple toward the Deconeus' manor on the eastern side of the island. It was a three-level structure, though dwarfed by the height of the Temple and its crown of spires. Though the manor house was connected to the splotched, cracking walls, its designs were different, showing it had been added many years later. Dozens and dozens of chambers crowded behind hazed windows. Silver-gilt tiles shingled the roof, making it shimmer when the sun shone overhead. Immaculately sculpted grounds decorated the exterior, tended by priests of Aster as part of their service. From above, the deafening peal of thunder from the huge bells announced the closing of the gates. The Nasturtium cleared the bridges and shut and locked the gates. Most of the island was deserted, and it felt strange walking in the dusk with Jonas, just the two of them. Seagulls screeched overhead, but none landed on the grounds, as if they too feared the priests of Aster.

After reaching the north doors of the manor house, Gabe paused. Another footpath intersected the one they followed. One direction led to the manor doors and the other to a little veranda with a deck leading down to the only dock on the island. Gabe spied benches and tables there, offering a perfect view of the Semn and Konen Dam.

Jonas stared hungrily at the benches and muttered, "You'd better be done soon, Gabe. They'll be launching the boats soon."

Taking the footpath toward the manor doors, they approached. The sun drained out of the sky, sinking into the horizon of the ocean. The air smelled of brine and garden flowers. A Nasturtium opened the manor doors as they arrived. Gabe recognized the man from the night of the last execution.

He was tall and well built, with a coppery tinge to his brown hair. Striking blue eyes scrutinized them. "Good evening. My name is Branhe, high seer of the Nasturtium. Only Master Finch is welcome to visit Radamistus." He turned to Gabe. "Your friend must wait outside."

Jonas shrugged and backed away. "I'll just wait…oh, say over there, Master Branhe – at the veranda if that's all right." He nodded to Gabe and muttered for him to hurry before he missed it. "Sorry for the intrusion, Holy One. Pardon me."

After following the high seer inside, Gabe observed the quality of the woodwork and stonework within the front archway of the manor. Polished marble with inlet bronze formed intricate shapes and symbols on the floor, symbols he did not understand but knew related to the Nasturtium's devotion to the Way of Deep Isme. He had never seen a priest conjure anything with their powers himself, but the island never lacked for rumors from those who claimed they had.

The high seer escorted Gabe down the marble hallway. Small incense cups interspersed the corridor, producing a pink smoke that smelled of lavender and sage. It was a peculiar blend of smells. Corridors intersected at odd angles, some leading into box-shaped rooms, others down steps and up steps. He memorized the path as he walked.

At last they reached a tall set of doors at the end of a long corridor. Before the doors sat two wide stone pedestals with stone dragons perched on the crest. The Nasturtium reached for the silver doorknocker and rapped loudly twice before pulling the doors open. The room was dark within, heavy curtains blocking out any trace of sunlight. A lamp burned in each of the six corners of the hexagonal room. The tingle of gooseflesh scampered up Gabe's arms.

Radamistus stood in the center.

"Enter Master Headsman," the Deconeus said patiently. "I trust you bring me news worthy of my attention." His eyes narrowed and a feeling washed over Gabe, a clammy feeling as if he were suddenly hanging upside-down over a deep well. Gooseflesh gripped his arms and neck in a shuddering, cold feeling. The high seer bowed and retreated, but Radamistus held up his finger. "Stay, Branhe. Stay with us."

Entering the room, Gabe approached the Deconeus while Radamistus fetched a tall goblet of spiced mead from a table. He wore the ceremonial black robes of his office with lace cuffs and swaths of medallions – the stole itself was inlaid with glittering stones and threaded in silver. Three wide couches were arranged near the center of the room. A polished onyx table with a mirror-like surface sat in the exact center. Heavy curtains hung on the walls and rustled.

Radamistus motioned toward a seat and took one across from it as Gabe sat down. He felt it absorb him like a feather mattress. The riches of being the Deconeus were displayed all around. Tall vases and glittering gem boxes. The executioner's robes fluttered around him and settled. He folded his hands nervously. He had never been so deep in the manor house before.

"You have been contacted." Radamistus' dark eyes were jagged, hard.

Gabe nodded. "His name is Dragan, and he wears a signet ring. I agree with your assumption that he's under the employ of someone from Premye. I could not get a good look at his left hand. He seemed to take pains to hide it from me."

Radamistus' eyes narrowed. "What does he want?"

"He commissioned me to design and build a crossbow. One with peculiar properties. Namely, its strength and complexity. Cost did not appear to be an issue. Should this concern you, Deconeus?"

The Deconeus nodded and began stroking his bottom lip. His wispy white beard was pointed at the chin, but oddly, his eyebrows were dark and thatched with gray. "Do you know how to contact him?"

"He has a man at the Cleanstool Inn on Southbridge in the Tier of Lunis named Rixard. That was the best I could get out of him."

"And did Dragan make mention of his employer's identity?"

"No."

Radamistus took a sip from the goblet. "Hmmm. The ring might be a deception anyway. To disguise the Tier his real employer is from." He paused and turned to the high seer. "Can you believe this audacity? Commissioning weapons from the Tier of Aster?" He chuckled with venom and then gazed at Gabe. "So, Master Headsman. What are you going to tell this Dragan fellow?"

Scraping his boot on the floor tile, Gabe looked back and shrugged. "I haven't had time to search Dragan out at the Cleanstool yet, to verify whether he can be reached there. I would like to make sure he isn't baiting a trap to test me." He looked at the Deconeus pointedly.

"Wise of you, Master Headsman. I need to know for certain who he is working for, and I will pay you very well for that information. Yes, I would like you to go visit the Cleanstool, to play along with his order. But you will keep me informed as to what you learn."

"That is what I had in mind."

Radamistus turned to the high seer. "Branhe, I would like you to wear the fashions of the Tier of Lunis and enter the Cleanstool before Master Finch arrives. If Dragan meets in a public place, I want you to follow him to wherever he is hiding and bring me word. Unless you can handle him yourself. If he's a Keeper, you may need more help."

An uneasy feeling came over Gabe. "Master," he interjected politely, "If someone other than myself tries to seek Dragan out, he may disappear entirely, and we won't find out what he's doing."

Radamistus and Branhe looked at each other. The high seer turned to Gabe. "I appreciate your

concern, Master Headsman, but Dragan will not know I am even there. With your leave, Deconeus, I'll begin stalking the Cleanstool tonight. Advent is a perfect opportunity to steal into Southbridge undetected."

Radamistus nodded. "You have my leave." The high seer of the Nasturtium stood and prepared to depart.

Gabe leaned forward, holding up his hand. "Pardon my further intrusion, but I must speak. I have full confidence that you are very capable, very experienced and wise, high seer. However, I insist that I follow up with Dragan alone. I am in your confidence and will tell you all that I learn. I am loyal to you, Deconeus, and to Aster."

The Deconeus leaned back and Branhe paused. They looked at each other and then at him.

"Really?" Radamistus said in a low voice. "Why should you be so concerned, Master Finch? You've told us everything you know about him, haven't you? Or did you leave something out?"

"No, Deconeus. It's not that at all. My reputation is at stake, as is the potential for future business. Let me verify that Dragan is there. That is all I ask. My information would save your Nasturtium wasted time."

"Time spent in Aster's service is never wasted," Branhe replied in a scolding tone. "Have you considered this may be a trap set to catch you outside the Tier of Aster, Master Headsman? My presence would only benefit you."

"But if Dragan suspected any underhandedness, it might ruin the deal. He is offering me a lot of money. Granted, all that I have belongs to this Tier. But if I do not do the job, he might choose someone else. Can you afford that possibility, Radamistus? Are your other weaponsmiths as loyal or as qualified to do this? What if Dragan seeks his crossbow in the Tier of the Infidel? Why risk that chance?" His throat craved a drink. He swallowed the dryness.

Radamistus stroked his beard. "I do not doubt your abilities, Master Finch. You are quiet and thoughtful, and you have quickness despite your great size. The people do well to fear you. But I have the right to know what transpires in the Tier of Aster, especially the employment undertaken in my demesne. No, Branhe will depart tonight and learn what he can in advance of your visit. And discover, if possible, more about where Dragan is hiding. Go, Branhe. With Aster's leave. And no more objections, Master Finch. I've decided."

Gabe looked at the Deconeus and then at the Nasturtium. Neither seemed like patient men. Should he risk their displeasure by arguing further? Anger stirred in his stomach, but he kept it far from his face. "As I said, Radamistus, I trust that you are both very capable, and of course I defer to your judgment." He paused. "I would like to be informed if anything is awry upon your inspection," he nodded to Branhe, "that I may be forewarned and prepared."

"He has a brilliant sense of reasoning, doesn't he?" Radamistus murmured. "I had not realized that about him." Gabe wondered for a moment who he was speaking about.

The high seer scowled at Gabe and then nodded. "Once I have entered the tavern, I will not be able to contact you without giving up my own position. But rest assured, Master Headsman. If I discover an ambush has been set for you, I will intervene before you come to harm. When I return to the Tier of Aster, I will tell you what I have learned and we can both prepare for the next encounter." He smiled, a ruthless smile. "You will be paid for your services, Master Finch. Whether by Dragan or Aster or both."

Gabe turned to Radamistus. "How long would you like me to continue my relations with Dragan?"

The Deconeus didn't hesitate. "By all means construct the crossbow. If they are useful, the Temple may acquire them from you."

A knock sounded on the door rapper.

Radamistus rose and set the goblet down on the table. "Time for my other appointment. The oil boats will be launching soon. Take Master Finch through the side passage and escort him to the front doors. I respect the privacy of my visitors, especially during an Abjuration. Thank you again for your information, Master Finch. You were wise to contact me. I look forward to hearing more about your meeting with Dragan. You may go."

Branhe pulled the curtain aside and touched a place on the stone wall. It opened soundlessly and a cool draft blew in Gabe's face. He and the high seer stepped into the darkened corridor and the door shut behind them. The Nasturtium withdrew a thin crystal and it glowed in his hand. The light was faint, but it was enough to see a dark passageway leading away from Radamistus' chambers. They were alone in the corridor.

The slight breeze brought a musty smell, but the light from the crystal did not waver or give off smoke. Branhe said nothing, and he walked at a quick clip, letting Gabe follow in his shadow. Corridors sliced at odd angles into the one they crossed. Some appeared to go deeper, others just disappeared into darkness. Branhe walked confidently, choosing the sideways that eventually brought them to a solid wall. The Nasturtium held the light up to the thick surface, and Gabe saw an inverted triangle. Putting his index finger, middle finger and thumb on the three points, Branhe pushed the triangle inward and a mechanism clicked. The wall swung open, connecting to the main hallway near the front doors. The high seer stepped into the corridor, looked both ways, and then motioned for the headsman to follow.

The sun had set. A few candles lit the way, but shadows painted most of the manor in gloom. The high seer escorted Gabe to the front doors and put up his hand. "There is one way we may be able to learn who Dragan is working for," he whispered. The corridor was empty. "When you meet, tell him that the weapon will not take long. That may encourage him to give his employer an update. I will follow him when he does. Do well on this assignment, Master Finch, and you may find other opportunities within the Temple walls itself."

Gabe nodded.

"The mercy of your axe is a blessing to many in this Tier. But I'm equally certain you grow weary of its burden. I can see it in your eyes. The Deconeus is generous to those who serve him. Remember that." He opened the front doors. "Now, go enjoy Advent with the poet who is your friend. We have allowed him to stay – a reward you have earned for him. Few are privileged enough to witness the boats from this vantage. Peace shadow you."

"Aster's light guide your journey, Branhe. Peace shadow you."

Jonas sat on the low wall running around the iron stairwell leading down to the only dock of the Tier of Aster. The waves splashed about forty paces below, sending a spray of hissing foam against the rocks.

Jonas looked at Gabe and pointed toward the City. "Doesn't it make you weep?" he whispered with reverence. "I haven't seen the city at night like this in fifteen years."

It was beautiful. The lights were dazzling, one from every window of every home and building. People danced in the streets, waving torches and singing and shouting. All the Tiers of the City stretched before them, high and distant and teeming. Konen Dam was completely illuminated, a giant white face in the darkness of the river. The Semn glittered, reflecting the hundreds of lights being dropped off the bridges into its fast currents. The Dam was still bare though.

"Sweet Aster, it's amazing," Jonas said, soaking up the view. "Radamistus could charge a hundred dyx for the privilege and Premyens would pay it. I've never seen Advent from here. Thank you, Gabe. I owe you a poem. A good one." He brushed his hands together. "They'll start dropping

the oil boats in a few minutes. It's getting dark enough. How did the visit with the Black Robes go?"

Gabe swallowed the splendor of the City and couldn't respond. It was like standing before the door of a furnace, except he felt only a cool salty breeze instead of throbbing heat. Jonas nudged him and repeated the question. Regaining his senses, Gabe explained about Radamistus sending a Nasturtium named Branhe ahead to the Cleanstool.

"The manor itself is amazing, isn't it?" Jonas said, still watching the dam. "You were gone so long, I thought you'd gotten lost in there."

"It is beautiful, but there was secret passageways too. So many tunnels. I would love to get the designs of it and the temple. Do you think they still exist? I wonder who built them?"

"Hmmm," Jonas thought. "The Temple was built centuries ago. Maybe Will knows something on it from the University...oh sweet Aster, there they go!"

Large catapults stationed along the dam fired kegs of tinder and ash into the sky. The kegs burst apart, showering the river with red and blue sparks. Gabe watched – it was a simple mixture of elements. The display went on for several minutes, booming explosions echoing over the city. Then oil boats tumbled over the edge of the dam, wave after wave of them. Cheers and shouts rose from the City in a roar.

Far below in the water, the light from several hooded lanterns suddenly revealed a small fishing sharpie, pushing sluggishly through the water toward the docks at the Temple of Aster. The light came from a legion sheriff skiff gliding through the current to catch the vessel. The skiff gained on the sharpie, cutting in at an angle. Gabe saw a cloaked person standing on the prow of the fishing vessel, clutching a medium-sized chest. The sharpie fought against the current, trying to reach the pier, but Gabe could tell that they would not make it before the skiff caught it.

* * *

"What in Aster's name?" Jonas said, after glancing down. "Look Gabe, you can see it against the lights. Must be seeking sanctuary!"

Gabe squinted in the darkness, feeling anger well up at the sight of the legion sheriffs. Nothing but petulant gutter dogs, the entire lot of them. He rose from the small stone wall. "I'm going down for a better look."

Jonas shook his head. "No, Gabe, it's too dangerous. Let Radamistus deal with it. The legion sheriffs still want me for the poem I wrote about the Provost." He looked around frantically. "Where are the Nasturtium? They should be here!"

Gabe hopped from the ledge, darting down the cage gate that led to the pier. The incoming vessels raced with the current to reach the dock. The staircase was steep and zigzagged down. As he descended, Gabe felt the spray of the sea kiss his face. He watched the sharpie and the skiff approach, but glanced down at the slick steps to keep from slipping.

The captain of the sharpie shouted in warning, and the cloaked figure looked back at the legion sheriff skiff. Steel reinforced a large ram mounted on the prow of the skiff. The vessel captain shrieked as the skiff glanced it, knocking it off course and toward the wall of the island. The figure on the prow staggered, the cloak billowing wide, and the person nearly tumbled into the sea.

Gabe stared in surprise. The cloaked person was a woman, her hair streaming over her face as the wind whipped it around. She caught herself at the edge, still clutching a heavy chest. The vessel lurched away from the pier, about thirty paces away from the docks. She dropped to her knees and looked back at the captain. The ships drifted closer to the pier.

"Madame, we're boarded!" the captain wailed as the legion sheriffs hustled on the deck. They

struck him with truncheons and knocked him down and began scrambling up on deck to grab her. She heaved the box toward the dock, but it fell short and splashed, plummeting under the churning waves.

"Stop, woman! You are in our jurisdiction!"

One of the sheriffs hurtled up the long prow to grab her. Turning back to the sea, she jumped off into the chilly waters. Gabe started with surprise and hurried down the steps. She bobbed up and started the swim toward the dock. The legion sheriffs commandeered the vessel and turned the helm to catch her. One of the sheriffs grabbed a mooring hook.

Gabe knew how chilling the shore waters were, even on the eve of summer, and rife with cold-water sharks. He skidded down a step, slipping, but caught himself on the rail. He slipped twice more, but caught himself from falling. The woman, her cloak and clothes dripping with seawater, swam toward a set of ladder rungs leading up to the docks. The legion sheriffs shouted to catch her, but veered off to avoid crashing into it.

Skillfully, the sheriffs pulled up alongside the docks and used the mooring staves to stop their vessel. Gabe reached the bottom of the ironwork steps and started down the pier as fast as he could.

Three legion sheriffs scaled the dock posts like wharf rats. At the end of the pier, the woman reached the top of the ladder and staggered toward the stairwell, coughing and vomiting water. Before she had made five steps, the legion sheriffs leapt onto the dock and blocked the way.

Her face went pale and she screamed, "Sanctuary! I'm in Aster, you craven beggars. I have sanctuary!" The three sheriffs assaulted her, clamping her mouth and struggled to drag her toward the end of the pier.

"Hurry!" a voice grunted from the skiff as it glided up to the end of the dock. "Quickly, before the Nasturtium come! Throw her down!"

Rage billowed inside Gabe. The woman struggled like a street cat with claws and teeth, and the sheriffs wrestled with her down the pier toward the skiff.

"Hullo!" yelled Jonas from above. "The legion sheriffs are invading the Tier of Aster! Hullo! Hullo!" His voice boomed from the cliffs above.

Like a thundering boulder tumbling down a mountainside, Gabe Finch rushed the legion sheriffs. His boots hammered against the planks and the executioners robes fanned out behind him, silver tassels flaring. Three sheriffs held the woman, and he had heard an additional one shout a warning from the skiff. There was at least one more on the vessel she had come from, unless they had all abandoned it. Five or six? He reached for his knives and prepared to kill them all if he had to.

As the sound of his heavy boots approached, the legion sheriffs faced him. Towering taller than any of them, the headsman of Aster thundered, "You have no authority in this Tier. Release this woman, or suffer Aster's wrath!"

"By the Veil!" one swore, looking at Gabe's size. "It's Radamistus!"

There was a moment of hesitation. The sheriffs seemed to be dazed with disbelief at the giant accosting them. The woman's eyes pleaded for help. One sheriff glanced down at the skiff just below them.

"In the boat!" someone shouted. "Kill him!"

Gabe wasn't sure where the order came from, but two of the legion sheriffs holding her let her go, leaving the last man to drag her flailing body toward the skiff. Drawing their truncheons, they rushed Gabe. He heard another sheriff start climbing the dock poles behind him.

The two legion sheriffs attacked Gabe with truncheons.

He sidestepped to the left and raised both of his huge daggers. "So be it!" he roared as the blades glimmered in the moonlight. The sheriff on his left swung out with the truncheon, but Gabe

blocked it with his dagger and backhanded the man across the face with the dagger hilt. He dropped to the dock and moaned.

The other sheriff swung the truncheon straight down at him, but Gabe caught the blow by crossing his daggers in front of him. With a mighty shove and a forward step, Gabe flung the legion sheriff backwards and he careened off the pier. He landed with a loud splash.

Gabe lunged after the sheriff who dragged the woman away. They reached the edge of the dock just as the captain cleared the top of the ladder, wielding a heavy crossbow. He leveled it at Gabe.

"Throw her in," the captain said. He had a dark beard and a long narrow nose.

Gabe hurled one of his daggers at the captain and ducked to the side. The dagger struck the captain full in the chest, and Gabe heard it pierce the hauberk. He barked in pain and fired, but the bolt whizzed by and impacted into a dock post. It quivered and hummed as it stuck, splitting the wooden post. The captain fell backwards off the ladder and landed in the skiff with a clattering noise.

Seizing the other sheriff's tunic, Gabe grabbed the one holding the woman and hauled him back as he started shoving her off the pier. She tottered at the edge. Her water-soaked clothes dragged her backwards and she screamed in fear. Tossing the sheriff aside like a child, Gabe grabbed the hem of her cloak as she fell. He twisted the wet wool in his hand, and grabbed her arm to pull her back. Behind him, he heard a sheriff charge.

He pulled the woman back, and she clutched him to keep from falling. The sheriff pounded Gabe on the back with the truncheon, trying to beat him to the floor of the docks. Pain exploded in Gabe's shoulder blade, but he was huge and couldn't be taken down so easily. Now that the girl was safe, he adjusted his grip on his other dagger and turned.

Twisting around and shielding her with his body, Gabe towered over the sheriff and watched the color drag from his face. He swung the truncheon again, but Gabe parried it. Looming closer, he waited for the man to swing again and then plunged the dagger into the sheriff's stomach. The force of his blow pierced the man's armor, spilling blood on Gabe's hand, and lifted the sheriff off his feet.

The man sagged to his knees, dropping the truncheon, and collapsed on the dock. From the top of the island, the glare of dozens of lanterns and a company of Nasturtium appeared. Gabe watched the dazzling light, and then heard the skiff push away from the dock. "Wait, captain, Wait!" shouted the sheriff Gabe had shoved into the waters.

The shivering woman still held onto Gabe's arm like a lifeline, her teeth chattering with cold.

"Wait!!" another sheriff wailed, his voice choked with fear. Gabe had smashed him in the skull, and he knelt, holding his bleeding scalp while blood rained across his face.

"Sit where you are!" Gabe thundered, placing the dagger hilt on his shoulder and forcing him to stay on his knees. "And wait for a kinder justice than you will receive at my hand if you don't!"

The black-robed Nasturtium raced down the zigzagging steps, some stumbling in their haste to make it down the slick steps. Gabe only had a few moments before they arrived. He looked down at the trembling woman and pushed her away to see her face. Wet clumps of hair pressed against her forehead. She looked pale and young. She still gripped Gabe's arm and looked up into the dark cowl.

"Th-th-thank you! Thank As-Aster," she said. "Are you…Radamistus?" He shook his head. "I m-must see him. I-I need sanctuary."

"Who are you?" Gabe asked her. The Nasturtium started down the pier, rushing forward with drawn sabers. The docks shuddered as they approached. "Why do you need sanctuary?"

"I'm...I'm a fugitive – I must see the…the Deconeus, put myself under the protection of Aster. Will…will you take me to him?"

The Nasturtium arrived with crossbows and sabers. The first wave let off a round of bolts

after the skiff. Bolts struck the wood with snapping sounds. A swarm of chaos engulfed Gabe and the woman and she pressed against him, tightening her grip on his cloak. She trembled with cold and then hunched over and vomited again.

"Stand clear!" the high seer Branhe shouted, waving his arms. "Hold!"

The priests seized the three sheriffs on the dock, including the dead man. Branhe raised his hands in the air, his fingers pointing together and his thumbs bridging them, forming a triangle in the hollow. "In the name of Aster," he said in a loud voice, "burn!"

Instantly the water took fire, sending leaping flames into the night air. The flames caught up with the skiff and licked the wooden frame and set it on fire. The light revealed the captain, frantically trying to direct the skiff away, but the flames rose up around him and he had nowhere to jump clear into the chilly waters.

"By the Veil," the woman whispered, wiping her mouth and gazing up at the burning ship.

"You are safe now, my sister," Branhe said and bowed. "Welcome into the arms of Minya's most high god. You are chilled and dripping wet, come to the Deconeus' manor and he will hear your oath tonight." He looked at Gabe. "Surely the Deconeus will wish to reward your valor, Master Headsman. You served Aster…yet again. Come sister, we will see you there safely."

She looked relieved but turned and glanced up at Gabe questioningly.

Gabe gripped the young woman's arm and brought her near. "I will take her."

The high seer nodded. "You deserve the right to claim your reward in person." He motioned for a small detachment to accompany Gabe and her. "Escort them to the manor. And take these men to the temple for questioning."

Gabe pulled her with him, to put a little distance at first between them and the Nasturtium who followed. He whispered to her, "You must choose for yourself who to trust, but here in the Tier of Aster, your sanctuary is secure." He patted her hand to comfort her.

"You're bleeding!" she said, looking down at his hand in the torchlight.

"No. It is the sheriff's blood." He was about to wipe it on his cloak, but she took her dripping one and washed it clean. Her teeth chattered as they walked, but she kept close to his warmth. She made it up only half the steps before staggering with chills, so Gabe carried her the rest of the way up. She was light and frail, easy to lift.

Jonas met them, enraged. "Those craven coddling moths!" he cursed, matching strides as Gabe hurried toward Radamistus' manor. "Who is she? Is she all right?"

"Wait for me," Gabe said and Jonas nodded, falling back. By the time they reached the door, Radamistus was already there, his black robes fluttering after him.

He also looked furious. He motioned to a servant. "Take her to the furnace room and have my maids give her something warm to wear." Reluctantly, she released Gabe's arm, looked back over her shoulder at him, and then followed the Nasturtium into the maze-like manor.

"Provost Retkonen will hear of this when the King's Will meets next week. He will learn Aster's wrath for himself this time." His eyes softened as he looked at Gabe. "You've had a busy day, Master Finch. It was truly Aster's foresight that brought you here tonight. You saved a poor girl's soul. Those wretched sheriffs will suffer for their folly. I may call on you to execute those we caught." He smiled knowingly. Gabe nodded. "Good work, Master Finch. Your service to Aster is recognized." Reaching into a pouch at his waist, he retrieved five silver dyx and dumped them in Gabe's hand. Gabe looked at the coins.

Radamistus nodded and smiled. "There is plenty of silver in Minya...for those who are servants of Aster. I do hope you remember that, Master Finch. I am always in need of trustworthy servants."

"Thank you, Deconeus. I pray the girl does not suffer unduly from her chills. A good evening to you." Gabe left the manor and met up with Jonas.

"You were amazing, Gabe. They came at you from all sides, but you scattered them like seagulls. Who is she? Did she tell you? This is going to make a great poem! A heroic poem!"

"She didn't tell me her name," Gabe answered, guiding the poet to Temple Bridge. The festivities of Advent were just starting, but Gabe wanted to get back to his forge and prepare a visit to the Cleanstool in the morning. The streets would be too crowded during Advent, which meant the legion sheriffs would be out in force as well.

"Was she pretty?" Jonas pressed. "I couldn't really tell."

"How would I know, Jonas? She was wearing a hood and mantle and she smelled like salt water."

"You carried her to the steps, Gabe," Jonas nudged.

"Green eyes." Gabe paused, remembering how green they were. "She has green eyes."

"A beauty, then," Jonas replied, grinning. "Come now, friend, it's not every day you get to save a pretty woman. Maybe she'll be grateful to you for saving…?"

"And maybe I'll look in the mirror when I get home and be as handsome as the Mark of Alvaron. When pigs dance and roaches taste like myristica!"

"You are not an ugly man, Gabe Finch. It's your size that intimidates. Next to me you make the Temple seem as tall as a cooper shack."

Gabe thumped the poet's back. "She was a pretty lass, Jonas. Maybe you could write the poem about her."

"I will, Gabe. By all that's holy, I will!"

* * *

Back at the forge, the furnace fires blazed hot and created a sheen of sweat on Gabe's face, warming him. The rushing sound the flames made was soothing, and Gabe sat down in his chair. His shoulder throbbed where the legion sheriff had clubbed him again and again, but it was a dull pain. Images from the evening came through his mind, and he let them linger this time instead of banishing them. He smiled with self-satisfaction – something he did only after completing an unusually brilliant item in his forge. He dropped the extra five dyx into his silver safebox and went to the cellar for a bottle of Atabyrion wine. He broke the seal, twisted out the cork, and poured his goblet full.

Two hours later, the bottle was empty and Gabe lay asleep with his face on the table, remembering the cold dampness of her cloak as the woman with green eyes wiped the blood from his hand.

# CHAPTER EIGHT
## High Street, Tier of Minya

Jaylin thought the City of Minya looked different through the eyes of a guardsman than it had through the jaded eyes of an Espion. As he followed the Queen's captain from Runners Bridge into the Tier of Minya, he was struck by the contrast between Thasos and Guyaume Reim. He remembered the Espion's constant wariness, watching for intrigue and signs of thieves and felons. Almost as if he were the one being hunted.

Thasos, on the other hand, ignored the rabble and sauntered through Minya like a man who owned the city. He walked with confidence, spent his coins freely, and seemed oblivious to the stares that followed him. A woven blue mantle made of soft wool draped over his broad shoulders. His highlander hung from a large leather shoulder scabbard – which alone may have kept thieves at a distance. Jaylin also remembered that he carried a dagger hidden beneath the folds of his tunic.

As the two walked, they shared their similar background – the wide-open hills of Atabyrion along with the confining discomfort of a port city they had both outgrown.

"Abyri was too small for you, too?" Jaylin asked, laughing.

"It's a beautiful country, but too quiet. Atabyrion is a place of trading now, no longer a home for a soldier. I studied under Master Cadsawan, the smith who makes the best highlanders. He also is one of the best instructors as well…or he was ten years ago. Lives in the foothills of the Genoayn Ridge."

Jaylin nodded. "He still is if I've heard it right."

"I made this sword, lad. Forged it myself and learned how to use it. I thought I'd earn more coin serving one of the Marks of Premye than hammering at tongs and anvils. But unlike you," he added, tugging sharply at Jaylin's shortened hair, "I kept mine."

"And the Queen? How did you end up working for her?"

"She only hires the most handsome, of course," he said with a wink. "Pity you wouldn't be noticed by her. And Cadsawan's training was better than I'd hoped. I was able to outmatch her entire guard in strength and stamina."

"That or they must all be lazy…"

"How's that arm? Has the salve worn off yet?" Thasos elbowed him right over the brand mark and Jaylin let out a hiss of pain. "It still hurts, does it? I'm sorry to hear that. Now, as I was saying, her captain was killed down in the Tier of Infidel during the war. We were ambushed in our own camp." Thasos' face went grave. "I made it out of that cesspit alive. I guess that meant something, so she named me as her captain. I've sailed back to Atabyrion several times to recruit. Do you know the Musteens and the Warburns?"

"I've heard of them, though I don't know them." He rubbed his arm and smirked, realizing what it meant to have an older brother. He found a little pity in his heart for his younger brother.

"There is enough going on in Minya to keep a soldier sated. By Aster, I love this city. That's a good inn over there, Jaylin, the Purple Rooster. Meanest hussies in the Tier of Minya, but the glazed wafers are the best, and the dancing makes you think you could fly. That blacksmith shop, Master Jamen's Forge. See that? Good man, that blacksmith. Helped me repair my hilt after the wars. Let me

borrow time in his forge."

Thasos knew the City, pointing out subtleties that Guyaume Reim had probably never noticed. Or even cared to notice. Thasos was an honest man, the kind of man Jaylin respected. He tried to absorb all he was told, but the words kept gushing out of Thasos as if from a broken keg.

"When autumn comes, try standing in High Street in the Tier of Premye during a light rain. The wetness brings out the sweetest smell from the chestnut trees. I tell you, some of these little alleys go into the most charming places. There's one park in the entire Tier of Minya. No one ever goes there, because only the neighbors know about it. I just wandered into it one afternoon several years ago. Delightful place."

"Tell me something, Thasos," Jaylin asked as they stopped in the south part of the Tier of Minya for meat pies from one of the captain's many favorite street vendors. "The legion sheriffs are not overly fond of the Espion, but how do they feel about Lady Minya?"

"The sheriffs? Oh, they think she's a saucy tart with a beautiful smile." He rolled his eyes. "One would have to ask them, I suppose," he answered blandly, giving Jaylin another elbow – though only into his ribs. "I doubt most sheriffs know she exists." He chewed a mouthful of flaked pie and murmured with delight. "I love the spices they use in this. The food in this Tier makes you swoon!"

"They are rather good. I haven't missed Atabyrion cooking once since I arrived."

"I'm not saying that a good kidney pie isn't a treat, but it is nothing compared with the fare from this City. But back to the matter at hand. From what you told me, Lady Minya probably has a small company of sheriffs working for her, no more than that. Doubtful if Carshalton is one of them, but perhaps he knows of the sheriffs who boarded your ship."

After finishing the meat pies, they continued through the thronging crush of people, angling toward Dry Dock that led to the legion sheriff wharves. Thasos didn't seem bothered at all by the crowds. He pointed toward the steeples of a church of Aster and suggested they head toward it. The buildings were so tall and chasm-like that Jaylin shuddered with excitement. The city proper bustled with people, tempers, and ideas. It took several hours to cross its thickest parts, and before they reached the church, the day started to close in behind them. After passing the church, they followed a road leading to a side dock that contained the skiffs owned by the legion sheriffs. Out into the choppy water, Thasos pointed to the Steene.

"That's your destination. It'll probably cost you a little to get taken over there. I'm assuming Jevin gave you money? Good. Why don't we plan to meet back at the church we just passed...say tomorrow morning? There are some fellows I know at the customs tables I'd like to speak to, in case Kalisha was booked in passage to another country. Of course, if she were kidnapped they'd use the piers in the Tier of the Infidel, but it is worth looking into."

"Very well. I will meet you tomorrow morning then."

"Unless you decide you like the view from the Steene." He grinned wolfishly. "If they arrest you and throw you in the dungeon, I'll use my signet ring tomorrow and have you freed. But hopefully you are clever enough not to need that."

Jaylin gave him a wry smile. "Now you're starting to sound like my mother, Thasos. Trust me."

"A young whelp like you needs looking after. Now wipe your nose and don't scuff mud on the mat." He gave Jaylin a small smile. "Good luck, lad," he said as he left and folded into the crowds, though never quite disappearing.

* * *

The Steene crowned a jutting island in the middle of the bay approaching the outwash of the Semn. The keep's aged walls and outer bailey glowed with the early evening sun. A few solitary birds swooped in the air above it. The Temple of Aster rose in the distance behind the fortress, like a mother standing next to her child.

As the few sheriffs disembarked from the skiff and stepped up on the deck, Jaylin asked, "How do I find Carshalton?"

One motioned ahead. "Just down the pier to that gate and ask directions. I don't know where Carshalton is right now, but they probably will. Quickly, lad, or there won't be a ride back for you."

Jaylin thanked the officer and jogged down the pier. At the end of the large gate ahead, a line backed up with visitors and City merchants, each being searched for weapons before entering.

"Your business?" the inspection officer asked him.

"I've a message to deliver to Captain Carshalton. Will you tell me how to find him?"

"Carshalton? He's the duty officer over trade. Southeast tower. Ask for him at the calling station."

Jaylin thanked him and entered the gatehouse. The island of the Steene rose up beyond it, and Jaylin had to climb four steep stairwells to reach the main plateau. The grounds were well-kept, but a vaulted, ribbed wall surrounded the cliffs. The citadel itself was blocky and square and looked thick enough to withstand catapult blasts of Minyan white fire. The walls loomed at least six or seven levels high, and the towers went higher still, capped with dark shingles and sloping minarets. The Steene was a cold, ominous place. Sheriffs patrolled the outer walls, and Jaylin thought he could see iron slats in all the windows.

Taking the footpath toward the citadel, he followed until it branched three ways. To the right, it went to the northeast tower. To the left, the southeast. Straight ahead went toward the main body of the Steene. Sheriffs and visitors milled about.

As he started going left to meet Carshalton, he recognized a man who turned down the northeast tower road. The recognition made his stomach lurch. It was the captain of the sheriffs who had boarded Jevin's ship at Dry Dock.

Jaylin recognized the arrogant profile, though he only caught a glimpse of it. His mouth went dry once he recognized the captain, but he kept walking to the left. Two sheriffs came up behind Jaylin, and he stopped them and motioned toward the captain walking the other way. "Is that Captain Carshalton?"

One sheriff shook his head. "No, Carshalton is southeast tower. That's not him, but you're heading the right way."

Jaylin hesitated. He wanted to follow the man, but his letter would not help him in that tower. He needed the man's name. "Who is he then, he looks so familiar. I think I saw him arresting someone for mystaqua once."

They both looked at Jaylin quizzically. "That's Captain Halesowen – northeast tower."

"Ohh," Jaylin said with a nod. "I've heard of him. Thank you." He let the two sheriffs pass him and slowed, watching Halesowen through the corner of his eye as he entered the other tower. Jaylin noticed that the sentries saluted him. After Halesowen had vanished, he hurried to the southeast tower and approached the sentries.

"I have a message for Captain Carshalton."

"Next level up the tower. Better hurry before he leaves for the day."

Jaylin nodded and went through the open gate leading into the tower. A winding stairwell followed up the tower wall, and he took the steps two at a time. The second level of the tower was

crowded with chests and barrels with notes and seals affixed to them. All around, sheriffs inspected the contents of the cargo and took notes on wooden tablets with sheets of paper.

One sheriff looked up at Jaylin. "Yes?"

"Captain Carshalton, please."

He pointed to a hulk of a man with graying hair, thick on top but tapered down the neck in the Minyan fashion. He stood talking to two other sheriffs, poring over a roster of some kind. Hearing Jaylin approach, he turned around. He had a serious face, but the half-smile on his mouth made him approachable.

"…And the manifest only said four crates of leeks, not sixteen. Did they think we can't count? I'm Carshalton," he said, folding his massive arms. "What can I do for you, young man?"

"I was wondering if I could have a moment with you, sir."

A look of annoyance crossed Carshalton's face, but then he sighed. "Well, you've come all this way. Follow me." Pointing to another sherrif, he said, "Keep the investigation until the end of the hour and see if they 'miscounted' any of the other items on the manifest." He then escorted Jaylin back to the stairwell and started climbing up. The third level had some interrogation cells, and Carshalton invited Jaylin into a room and offered a wooden chair with a stuffed seat.

"Well, what news from Atabyrion?"

Jaylin blinked, a little surprised.

"Your accent. And the white edges around your cut hair. Haven't seen much sun. I have had the pleasure of knowing a few Atabyrions. You have a reputation for being trustworthy."

"Hopefully I'll earn that from you as well," Jaylin said, pleased, and handed him the note from Trillings.

He read the scrawl quickly and then flipped the paper over to look at the other side. "You are Jaylin Warnock from the Wumsiah abductions?"

Jaylin nodded. "You've heard about it? Do you remember Captain Trillings?"

The sheriff nodded. "He's a good man. I helped supervise his training here at the Steene, and I recruit young sheriffs from Abyri now and then." He looked at the paper again. "The ink is still very fresh, probably only a few days, if that. How long have you been in Minya, Jaylin?"

It was impressive how he gained information from evidence. "Just a few days. But you know, a few days in Minya can feel like a month."

Carshalton smiled and then motioned toward Jaylin's face. "You've been in a fight already, it seems. Good stitching job, whoever the healer. Is that what you wanted to see me about? Atabyrions may be trustworthy, but they take slights very personally. Are you here for vengeance?"

"Information, actually. No, this scar is just a little bad luck, that's all. If anyone in the Steene would know the answer to my question, it would be you. What can you tell me about Captain Halesowen?"

The sheriff leaned back in his chair, folding his arms, and scrutinized Jaylin. "He's a captain in the northeast tower." He paused. "I think you already know that though."

"And what area is he responsible for? What does the northeast tower investigate? The mystaqua trade?"

Carshalton looked wary. "I'm sorry, Master Warnock, but I'm going to need to know a little bit more information about you before I say any more."

"Why is that?"

He rubbed his chin. "An Atabyrion arrives in Minya several days ago. You're wearing Minyan clothes, you've cut your hair recently, and now you have a terrible wound on your face. You approach me with a note written by a friend of mine and start asking questions about the hierarchy of the

legion sheriffs." He shook his head. "Who is the justice mayor of Atabyrion?"

"Wendel Lucas."

"What is Trillings' first name?"

Jaylin thought a moment. "Petrin. "

"And who was the justice mayor of Atabyrion five years ago?"

"Carter Diam. Do you believe me yet?"

Carshalton nodded and smiled. "Well that's a relief. I thought for a moment you were an Espion trying to trick me. I'm responsible for trade and fraud, Jaylin. It's my nature to doubt everyone no matter how friendly or glib they are. It would amaze you how many people in this city will hand over a purse full of coins to a complete stranger who can talk well. I'm not one of them. Now, tell me why you need this information about Halesowen. I can help you better if I know what you're looking for."

Jaylin looked at Carshalton's face, tried to determine if he was someone he could trust. The legion sheriff was a shrewd man and his intellectual defenses were tight. Not a man who was quick to fool. He did seem genuinely friendly though, but Jaylin wasn't sure how much about himself he should reveal.

Carshalton leaned forward. "It's your choice whether to trust me or not. I'll not be offended if you walk away."

"Fair enough," Jaylin said, pressing his fingers together. "But understand that I am in the same position as you. I need your help, but there are things I can't say at this point."

"Are you Espion?" Carshalton asked. His eyes narrowed. "I didn't notice a ring."

"I'm not one yet," Jaylin said. He was not the kind of person who ever invented a lie to make things easier. He did not know any of the Espion passwords. He did not have a ring. The truth was much easier. "Thanks to Trillings, I was brought over on Prince Jevin's ship to work for him. I have since been let loose on Minya to look into a private matter for the Prince, and to get a feel for the city."

"Why would the Prince be interested in Halesowen?"

"Because he came to the docks with a woman and accosted our ship when I arrived. I'm looking for that woman, and I think he does some extra work for her or with her. He's not someone that I can approach on my own, so I'm coming to you for help."

Carshalton nodded and lifted his finger to his lips. He leaned forward, as did Jaylin. "Be wary what you insinuate about Captain Halesowen. It could get you into trouble. You took a risk by telling me this. If I were his friend, you would be in trouble right now. I believe I can trust you –Trillings wouldn't have sent someone to me who I couldn't." He cleared his throat. "This is a little too early to be taking the Measure. That's peculiar, but not overly so. You may have been trained in Abyri for all I know."

Jaylin smiled. "No. Not really."

His face grew serious. "Let me answer your first question then. Captain Halesowen is responsible for the mystaqua crisis in Minya. The northeast tower handles the black market and the gypsy underground. That is why your question about Halesowen's duties concerned me."

Jaylin nodded, understanding. "I imagined it would."

"There's been talk around the Steene – nothing official, mind you – that Halesowen has been under the employ of mystaquan ring leaders, including a woman...one whose real name eludes us. You are certain you saw Halesowen board your ship?"

Jaylin nodded. "What do you know of this woman?"

"She has many names in the Steene, but most of them are whispered – Lady Minya, Lady Mystaqua, the Foreigner, the Marquess, the Queen's Sister." He smiled ironically. "I've never seen her

here, but I've had suspicions that Halesowen knows who she is. And how to contact her. The woman you saw…was she beautiful?"

Jaylin nodded. " I believe we are talking about the same person. The Espion calls her Lady Minya."

He sat back and scrutinized Jaylin. "That leads me to ask my next obvious question, Jaylin Warnock. What business does an Atabyrion have looking for someone like her?"

"To be honest, I'm not exactly sure at this point," Jaylin replied.

"What do you mean? You are looking for one of the most dangerous people in Minya, and you don't even know why?"

"I suspect she may be involved in or have knowledge of the mishap I am investigating for Jevin. I want to talk to her about it. You see, she took some interest in me onboard the ship. I don't think Jevin would approve of me contacting her. But I think that she will be willing to speak to me."

"From what I've heard, you never find her. She finds you." He smiled. "So, the Prince brought an Atabyrion in to do this? He is a rather clever man, I've always thought."

"Are you part of the Espion?" Jaylin asked.

Carshalton smiled. "By the Veil, no. Many of my investigations result because of some dishonesty of the Marks of Premye. They don't really like me, actually, because I make it difficult for them to cheat the unwary. But I've always thought highly of Prince Jevin. His business operations are beyond reproach."

"That's good to know. He thought an outsider would have more success with certain things than someone mired in Minyan affairs."

"Only someone who was capable of surviving in this trap of dock rats and wolf-spiders. That says a lot about you. Now, let me think. You need a way for Lady Minya to know you want to see her. If you suspect that Halesowen knows her, that's your link. Perhaps I can help – in a way that won't compromise either of us."

"I'm listening." Jaylin smiled, pleased.

"I could have a note delivered with a suggestion about a potential mystaqua smuggling contact staying at a certain inn. If he went to investigate, you might be able to meet with him before he goes in and drop off your message. You certainly shouldn't do it in the Steene."

"Obviously," Jaylin said wryly.

"Yet, I must warn you. Halesowen is a skilled legion sheriff. You're young, and he knows how to handle a truncheon better than any man I know." He frowned. "Arranging this visit may harm more than help you."

Jaylin thought about the proposal. "Actually, Captain, it sounds like a good idea. If you would tip him off for tomorrow night, that should give me enough time to make preparations for it. Pick an inn in the Tier of Median or Minya that you think would be fine. I can arrange everything from there."

"There's a seedy inn past the gates between Median and Minya, the second gate east from the Semn, called West-Allen. The inn is called the Royal Cougar. One of the heavy cloth traders in Minya is Rohun Debahn – I've got an itch that he's a mystaqua addict and tradesman. Whether or not you catch Halesowen there, I've been meaning to ask him to interrogate Rohun. He's in from the Venzian Provinces this week, and I know he always stays there. I'll leave a note for Halesowen tomorrow that Rohun's in trouble and needs money. That should work. Now, you sure you know what he looks like? I want no mistakes."

"I'll be fine. Thank you, Captain. I owe you a debt that I hope to repay someday."

"I'll remember that, Warnock." He leaned forward. "Especially if I need the Prince's ear in the

future."

"Thank you again, Captain. I'll not forget that you helped me."

They said farewell, and Jaylin proceeded out of the Steene. He watched for Halesowen along the way but did not encounter him. Keeping his head low, he hurried toward the docks and then joined a ferry back across to the Tier of Minya. Night had begun settling over the lower Tier, and he realized that he would need a place to stay before Curfew.

Jaylin set out at once to find an inn. The inns of Dry Dock were more reputable than the inns of Mist Dock, but they were all ramshackle. Crooked windows and flaky whitewash hung on moldered slabs of stone. Searching the neighborhood around a church, he found that most of the inns were full already, but he did find one, the Rabbit Tavern – he smirked at the signboard – that had a room to spare.

Putting a silver dyx to hold the room for him, Jaylin found a table with an open chair. He ordered a large dinner and sat facing the door to keep an eye on those entering and leaving the tavern. Not long after he arrived, Jaylin noticed a man arrive wearing drab-colored pants and a dull green dockman tunic. He scanned the room, seemed to squint when his eyes ran across Jaylin, and then stole to another corner of the room and ordered a meal.

Jaylin knew at once that he had been followed.

* * *

The man was medium-sized, probably in his early thirties, with a shock of spiky brown hair. He was probably just a scout, a paid follower, or maybe a thief. A serving girl arrived with Jaylin's food, roast capon with myristica and a cup of sweet mead. Jaylin took the dull table knife and cut strips from the capon. If the man had followed him, Jaylin decided he wanted to find out. There was no sense wasting a good meal over it, though. He drank, ate leisurely, and let time drift by like the wind. The meal left a tang in his mouth. He savored the sweet mead, spitting the dregs out as he sipped from it, and watched the man over his cup. The fellow had only ordered one drink with his meal, and he took little swallows from it to drag it out.

*And who is this man following me?*

He had to find out. Rising from the table, Jaylin brushed the crumbs from his pants. Grabbing his drink, he deliberately approached the man at the table.

"Do you mind if I share a table with you?" Before letting him respond, Jaylin sat down and faced him.

Jaylin took a calm sip from his mug and watched the muscles in the man's neck tighten. His eyes went wide with shock and then quickly relaxed. The struggle for control lasted for just an instant, but Jaylin noted it with satisfaction.

"Go ahead," the man replied in a deep voice.

Jaylin had a better look at him now. He was fairly tall and his dark brown – almost gypsy black – hair was spiky and swept back. Black stubble spread over his cheeks and chin, and his eyes were flinty blue in color. He looked deeply suspicious but tried to carry himself well.

"I'm Jaylin." He extended his hand.

"Ethen," the man replied with a slight nod, but did not accept it.

Jaylin smiled, determined to make him uncomfortable. "So Ethen, what do you do in the Tier of Minya?"

"I'm a dock worker," Ethen lied. Jaylin knew it instinctively, even though his tone hadn't changed. "What's your profession...Jaylin was it?

"Oh, I just arrived a couple of days ago," he said with a mocking half-smile. "I'm still looking for something to settle on. For the moment, I'm sort of an errand. You know how it is – go do this, go get that, find out what you can about such and such. It's actually rather interesting work. I might get lucky and stick with it." He took another calm sip from his mug and watched Ethen's face.

The blue eyes were doubtful, probing, and a sheen of sweat appeared on his brow. He started fidgeting, and Jaylin knew he had made him uncomfortable. He was probably trained as an observer, not one who liked confrontation, which put the situation out of his ken. Seeing the weakness, Jaylin shot straight in.

"You know, it's funny," he added. "Since I don't entirely understand the depth of some of my errands, I tend to be a little suspicious. Imagine, I even thought you were following me! Strange, is it not?"

Ethen took another swallow, wiping his mouth. His cup was empty. Jaylin was convinced the man was an Espion.

"So, what is it like working on the docks, Ethen? That was one area I was thinking of looking into. What can you tell me about it? And don't spare the details, it won't bore me a bit. The more, the better! What company do you work for?"

At that, Ethen's forehead split into four wrinkles and he blinked quickly, his eyes suddenly watering. With a trembling hand, he raised the cup and drained the remains of an empty drink. He even cocked his head back, trying to coax the dregs from the bottom. Jaylin could tell he was desperate to think of a way out of the situation – or something to say.

A loud series of gongs moaned outside as the curfew bells went off across the Tier of Minya. No mistaking the noise.

Ethen looked relieved. "By the Veil, is it curfew already?" he said, feigning shock. "I've got to get back to work, before I get in trouble." He hastily stood. "It was nice chatting with you...Jaylin." He smiled, a strained nervous smile.

Jaylin watched as he maneuvered through the crowd toward the door. Ethen's voice – too trained and formal for a dockworker. Taking another sip from his drink, he felt smug. Wiping his mouth, he scanned around the room. After the curfew bells had tolled, some others swore and hurried outside, returning to their homes or jobs, worrying about the excuses they'd have to make to the legion sheriffs. Jaylin looked at the others and felt that no one was too suspicious. Those who had rooms could sit up and drink as long as they wanted. Some even paid for a place on the floor, but it was a sticky, sorry excuse for a night's rest.

Jaylin struck up a conversation with a real dockworker, just to get a feel for the people of the Tier. With goods coming into the City at all hours, the docks and warehouses along Mist Dock and Dry Dock were active all day and night, but the City proper was under curfew, and he learned that anyone caught in the streets could be arrested, beaten, escorted home, or thrown into the sewers. An hour after curfew, the man Jaylin was talking to had to get back to work and left the inn.

Jaylin finished his mead and went to bed. The room was a small box, just wide enough to lie down in. The ceiling was low and cramped. The door had a lock, but it looked like it had been picked so many times it wouldn't work. Before sleeping, he dabbed the ointment the healer had provided to his face and felt it sting. He also rubbed some into the wound on his shoulder. The pallet was lumpy and uncomfortable, and he felt a momentary twinge of regret that he hadn't tried to find the Bright Well in the dark.

* * *

Jaylin awoke with a mild headache and smelling like a sweaty blanket. The cut on his face throbbed. He sat on the edge of the bed, waiting for the pain to dull a little, and he thought about Halesowen and Lady Minya. He needed to find her, and the sheriff was the only way he could think of. But how would Halesowen react? What was the best way to approach him? Their first meeting had ended with Jaylin kneeling on the deck of Jevin's ship, trying to breathe through the pain.

After securing his things, Jaylin left the room and the Rabbit Tavern without a drink or a bite to eat. The city streets were already mobbed with crowds, and he felt small in the maze of passing bodies. So many faces, of people he would never meet. So unlike Abyri. The church of Aster near the legion sheriff docks was easy to find, especially once the morning bell rang the hour. He found Thasos Walkelin pacing on the front steps.

"Well, Jaylin, you're here, which means I don't have to plan an assault on the Steene. Thank Aster for that. How's your cut?"

"It stings," Jaylin replied angrily. "I swear to you, I owe Jorganon Alvaron for this."

"I wish you luck collecting," Thasos replied cynically. "The Mark has more debts than a Gypsy King. I'm sure you'll have to get in line to claim your share."

"Oh, it will be worth the wait. Trust me."

Thasos folded his arms and arched his eyebrows. "Hungry?"

"Now that you mention it," Jaylin answered, feeling his hunger stir. They walked to a street vendor and brought some bread stuffed with cinnamon, apples, raisins, and dates, and also some whole fruit. Thasos paid for both of them again. While eating, they wandered back toward the church.

"I didn't have any luck with the harbor master. The Espion had already been there and asked the question. But the harbor holds no answers…at least not yet. How long were you at the Steene?"

"Not very long. I stayed at the Rabbit Tavern – wouldn't recommend it – but I was being watched. He didn't do a very good job, though. He was probably an Espion. And if they are all as bad as him, no wonder the Prince can never get anything done."

Thasos spat on the cobblestone. "You are right. There are definitely too many silly spies in this city." He shot Jaylin a mean look. "Present company included." Then he smiled. "You should probably know this about me, Jaylin, because I don't lift an eyebrow about the lot of them. By the time this person gets back and reports to whoever it was that sent him, we'll be on our way. So, how did you handle the fool?"

"He was just a looker, Thasos, and not much of a talker when put on the spot."

"You confronted him then? Like a good Atabyrion. I respect that. I might've walked over and punched him in the mouth if I thought he was looking at me."

Jaylin laughed. "I thought about that. Anyway, someone is interested in me. Let's just hope she's pretty and has a way with Atabyrions." He told Thasos about seeing Halesowen while going to see Carshalton.

"Head of the mystaquan brigade," Thasos said with a nod. "Good with a weapon, or so I've heard. An arrogant coddling moth. Maybe I'll have to humble him."

"I think you will get your chance. Halesowen should arrive at a Median inn sometime today looking for a suspect. But I'm not quite sure how he will appreciate being baited into fetching Lady Minya for me."

"How did he seem to you when you met him on the docks?"

"Halesowen? He'd get along well with Jorganon. I thought I might need to hire some dockworkers and bring them with me to pummel the man, but I don't know that I'm ready to make an enemy of him yet. What do you think?"

"Wise, considering you have a brand on your shoulder already." He shook his head. "I wouldn't meet him by yourself – you'll need someone who can countermand him, especially if he tries to arrest you."

"Someone who outranks him perhaps?" Jaylin suggested.

"It just so happens that I'm free today," Thasos said with a smirk. "But I won't wait days for you, lad. I do work for the Queen after all. And her brother needs looking after. Who knows what foolish things Jorganon has done by now? How many times he has shamed himself?"

Jaylin nodded and wiped his mouth. "Tell me more about him." The cold feeling of hate congealed in his stomach just thinking the man's name. It did not matter to Jaylin that Alvaron was a nobleman. His station made his injustices even more callous. There would be a reckoning. By the Veil of Aster, there would be a reckoning.

"Talk about him while we're eating? It'll ruin the food!"

"I'm serious, Thasos. Tell me more about the man."

"I can see you already loathe him. He has that affect on decent people. I have no fond feelings for him either, despite the Queen's patience. You remember the Atabyrion proverb – when you marry a wife, make room in your bed for her brothers? Jorganon is the ugly black toe that came with Queen Keyana Alvaron. It was a marriage of tangled loyalties, from what I heard of it, but it brought King Davin-Noll some stability in the City. The Queen is right fair, a little older than her husband, and very gracious about his infidelity."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. She knows that it is her place to provide an heir. Naturally, she wants her son Illion to be so named."

"Wouldn't that be assumed?"

"Absolutely not," Thasos said, shaking his head. They had both finished eating and wandered through the crowds. "The Sovereign can name any relation to the throne. Riots have started when Sovereigns named cousins instead of their own sons. And so the Queen's longsuffering endures. Once Davin-Noll is dead, she will be the next ruler of Minya – I assure you of that."

"You sound rather confident. She has that much power?"

Thasos shrugged, his smile twisted with delight. "Power she has. And plenty of it. But her younger brother Jorganon is another matter. This part gets a little difficult to explain, especially to an Atabyrion. We hardly know the differences between this Mark and that one, but it is pretty important here. I doubt I understand it fully myself.

"Explaining politics is not as easy as teaching someone an undercut with a dagger." Thasos grabbed Jaylin's elbow and pretended to thrust a blade up into his armpit, then chuckled and let him go. "Jevin's and Davin-Noll's father was the Mark of Tousann, and he usurped the throne over twenty years ago. But his enemies poisoned him early in his reign, and Davin-Noll took up the saber during the riots that followed. He defeated the House of Alvaron decisively and put them all to death. A bloody mess, I've been told. However, he was charmed by one of Alvaron's cousins, a lovely woman he didn't have the heart to bring under the axe. The deaths of all her kinsmen left her the heiress of Alvaron, and she had no qualms about sealing peace between families through marriage and her new lands. Her little brother was just three, and didn't pose any threat himself – well, back then anyway."

"I'd heard that before. That the Alvarons used to rule in this City." Jaylin wondered how much the young Mark of Alvaron desired the throne for himself. There were many people in the way of him claiming it though.

"Exactly. Meaning, of course, that Jorganon has a right to be king. I think I'd rather have

a mouth full of blisters than endure Jorganon as Sovereign of Minya. He is a noble of the sword and uses his authority like a man urinating on a post. The Queen countermands him constantly, lest he truly botches things and endangers not only his own freedom but the future of her son." He shrugged. "Which he did yesterday morning, for instance, when he tried tossing you into the sewers."

Jaylin winced. "I remember it well. He may have noble blood, but he is not a nobleman. At least in my eyes."

"So, though the Mark of Alvaron does not have many friends at court, he does have some spineless nobles whispering for him to usurp. He's a strong lad. I trained him myself when he was younger. I just hope his ambition doesn't let him run too much afoul of Jevin."

"Why Jevin?"

"Because it is Jevin that Davin-Noll trusts. It is Jevin that Davin-Noll favors. No other Mark of Premye in the city could cause Jorganon's downfall. Jevin's a thinker and a soldier. Though Jorganon may be strong enough to whip the Prince's royal arse, Jevin's no fool, nor that easy to best with a blade. At least from what I've heard of the Espion's training."

Jaylin cocked his head. "You know, Thasos. It's rather convenient having someone like you around. Even if you do work for the Queen."

Thasos shrugged at the compliment. "Trust me, this adventure is a far cry above my normal duties."

"Which are what? Trimming your beard and polishing your scabbard buckles?"

"No. Tending Premyen princesses."

"Princesses?" Jaylin said with interest. The thought of it made him laugh. "I just may be working for the wrong nobleman!"

"Lad, you should have thought about that before you let Jorganon ruin your cheek."

**To be continued in the March 2003 edition of Deep Magic...**

Leave a message about this story.